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**“A True Conservative Wants to Conserve”: American Women and the Conservative Environmental Movement in Historical Perspective**  
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# **“A True Conservative Wants to Conserve”**

## **American Women and the Conservative Environmental Movement in Historical Perspective**

MA Thesis North American Studies

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### **Abstract**

Amidst the ever-growing prominence of climate challenges, environmentalism has transformed into a highly contentious subject within the US. Given the nation's considerable role in environmental degradation alongside its prominent global position, internal divisions are a substantial barrier to environmental progress. Politically, the American right has become associated with anti-environmentalism; however, as this thesis helps to understand, this has not always been the case. Moreover, in recent years a new movement has arisen that aims to reunite Republicans with their environmental past. The conservative environmental movement is an intriguing development within the environmental debate. I examine the movement in light of environmental history and combine it with the field of gender research, as the significant contributions of women to the movement have oftentimes been neglected in scholarly works. In bringing these two phenomena together, this thesis addresses the research gap located in the intersection of these academic fields. I apply two different research methods, combining historical and social research, or content analysis. I investigate two current conservative environmental organizations, RepublicEn and the American Conservation Coalition, as well as the product of the institutionalization of the movement, namely the Conservative Climate Caucus. This study is led by the question, how have women contributed to the conservative environmental movement in the United States? The answer is multifold. Historically, women have played significant roles in the development of American environmentalism by using their womanhood and feminine qualities like cooperativeness and communication skills. My socio-political analyses of the present-day conservative environmental movement add nuance: I find gendered distinctions in the conservative environmental approach in the form of the paradigms of “leadership” and “cooperation”. Within the civic organizations of this study, a clear gender difference exists as the women under study are more likely to take a cooperative approach, in contrast to their leadership-oriented male counterparts. This distinction dissipates when women obtain more power, which is shown through the near absence of these distinct approaches within the party itself.

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## List of Abbreviations

ACC	American Conservation Coalition
AUAM	American Union Against Militarism
CCA	Christian Coalition of America
CCC	Conservative Climate Caucus
CEQ	Council on Environmental Quality
EEN	Evangelical Environmental Network
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
LCHA	Love Canal Homeowners Association
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NRPE	National Religious Partnership for the Environment
UNDHR	UN Declaration on Human Rights
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WPP	Woman's Peace Party
WPS	Women's Peace Society
WPU	Women's Peace Union
WSP	Women Strike for Peace
YCER	Young Conservatives for Energy Reform

## Introduction

With the continuous rise of climate issues and concerns, environmentalism has evolved into one of the most politically polarizing issues in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The increasingly divisive character of the environment and environmental action is a disturbing development in the face of the urgent problems constituted by climate change. Given the US' status as a substantial contributor to environmental pollution, coupled with its preeminent global influence, the domestic discord surrounding the matter is imposing a significant impediment on environmental initiatives.

From a political point of view, in present-day America the right is oftentimes associated with anti-environmentalism and climate skepticism; however, as this thesis helps to understand, this has not always been the case. Indeed, Republicans have a long and significant history of environmental action and political activism, from Theodore Roosevelt, who was the first US President to establish a national conservation agency and to contribute to the creation of over 229 protected areas, to Richard Nixon, whose administration saw the launch of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the expansion of US federal environmental legislation. Throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s, environmental legislation was installed through extensive Republican initiative, with bipartisan support. Examples of this trend are the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Clean Air Act of 1970, and the Clean Water Act of 1972.<sup>2</sup> It was hoped that the environment might serve as a catalyst capable of fostering unity across the political spectrum.

Yet, the environment has become one of the most dividing issues of our time. The politicization of the environment, with historical antecedents tracing back to the 1940s, truly

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Newport, "Update: Partisan Gaps Expand Most on Government Power, Climate," *Gallup*, August 7, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/509129/update-partisan-gaps-expand-government-power-climate.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> James Morton Turner and Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal: Conservatives and the Environment from Nixon to Trump*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

gained salience during the tenure of Ronald Reagan in the presidential office. Under Reagan, neoliberal ideas found their way into the Republican Party and began to alter conservatives' views toward the environment. This development, which has been called the "Republican reversal", marked the beginning of the Republican anti-environmentalist sentiment and agenda that are still very prevalent today.<sup>3</sup> However, as this thesis argues, there have been continuities in American conservative environmentalism, which have been mostly characterized by women's actions and approaches. This helps to explain some of the trends within the current Republican Party that have been responsible for a second reversal. Some branches of the American right are indeed starting to rediscover their environmental roots, both within the Republican Party and among the conservative public. The ways in which such a development has taken shape and an analysis of the roles that American women have played in it are at the heart of this thesis.

The historical relationship of Republicans with the environment has been researched by several prominent scholars, most notably by Turner and Isenberg<sup>4</sup>, who coined the term "Republican reversal" to indicate the paradigm shift among the party under Reagan. Other prominent scholars that have explored this history include Pogue,<sup>5</sup> who specifically researched the relation between environmentalism and religious conservatism, and Drake,<sup>6</sup> whose work focuses on the inherent contradiction between environmentalism and anti-governmentalism on the political right. Although these scholars approach the topic from different angles, they all agree that a historical shift has taken place in the right's position toward environmentalism over time, and specifically in the 1980s. They thus challenge the common misconception that Republicans have always been environmental sceptics. My research takes this strand of

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<sup>3</sup> Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Neall W. Pogue, *The Nature of the Religious Right: The Struggle between Conservative Evangelicals and the Environmental Movement*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Brian Allen Drake, *Loving Nature, Fearing the State Environmentalism and Antigovernment Politics before Reagan*. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2013).

literature to the realm of gender history and relations. I isolate and identify the contributions that women have made to the continuation of environmentalism within the Republican Party by emphasizing their political efforts and activism.

Turner and Isenberg's book *The Republican Reversal*<sup>7</sup> analyzes forty years of politics to demonstrate how conservative influence initiated the change in environmental views on the right, starting in the 1970s. They attribute this shift to a combination of conservative ideology and the influence of business interests. They emphasize that free market values push aside scientific expertise and tend to perceive environmental laws as excessive. Turner and Isenberg discuss the Republican reversal at length, highlighting in doing so several different aspects to it, such as ideology, economy, and free market principles. In touching upon the role of religion in these processes however, they do not discuss the complexities of evangelical history and its relationship to environmental activism. This is something which Pogue discusses in much depth and detail. In his work *The Nature of the Religious Right*,<sup>8</sup> Pogue argues against the commonly held perception that evangelical Christians have always opposed the environmental movement, claiming that when one examines environmental history in the United States, it becomes clear that evangelicals from the 1960s until the 1980s were environmentally concerned. Pogue also points toward Reagan's era as the conservative turning point. He views Reagan's economy-focused policies and priorities as the main drivers behind this move. However, when it comes to the evangelical conservatives, Pogue argues that the community was divided on the issue of the environment for several years before the shift took over the evangelical Christian movement completely, almost a decade later. In his book *Loving Nature, Fearing the State*,<sup>9</sup> Drake shines a light on another contradictory issue in the relationship between Republicans and environmentalism: those who agree with the movement's ideals often

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<sup>7</sup> Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*.

<sup>8</sup> Pogue, *The Nature of the Religious Right*.

<sup>9</sup> Drake, *Loving Nature*.

do not wish to associate with the movement itself. Many conservative Americans, he claims, are worried about the environment however do not consider themselves environmentalists per se. He points toward the Reagan presidency's deep focus on the economy over the environment as a main source of this anti-environmentalism.

Similar to the study of Republican environmental history, research on women's relationship with the environment is still developing. The most significant studies in this field have been performed by the following scholars. Taylor<sup>10</sup> and Unger<sup>11</sup> write about early environmentalism in the context of race, class, and gender, and gender and sexuality respectively. McCammon et al.<sup>12</sup> wrote a book chapter on female leadership within the rise of environmentalism, and Spears<sup>13</sup> explores the modern environmental movement post WWII.

In *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*,<sup>14</sup> Taylor goes back to the first forms of environmental action, which she describes as elitist, white, and male-dominated. She examines how economic, political, intellectual, and religious interests shaped the early conservation and environmental movements and claims that racist and sexist tendencies were a considerable part of these processes. She touches upon many different aspects of the early days of American environmental awareness, such as rural beautification, the initiation of hunting ethics, and the first outdoor sports clubs and environmental organizations such as the Audubon Society. I will discuss these phenomena more in depth later on in this thesis. Like Taylor's work, Unger's book *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*<sup>15</sup> focuses on the early days of the movement as well, and specifically aims to understand the gendered differences in how nature

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<sup>10</sup> Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Nancy C. Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Holly J. McCammon, Alisson McGrath, David J. Hess, Minyoung Moon, "Women, Leadership, and the U.S. Environmental Movement", in *100 Years of the 18th Amendment: An Appraisal of Women's Political Activism*, ed. Holly J. McCammon, ed. Lee Ann Banaszak (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), p. 312–333.

<sup>13</sup> Ellen Griffith Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement post-1945*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*.

<sup>15</sup> Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*.



was perceived and experienced on the frontier. Unger goes beyond the common notion of women as “nature’s housekeepers” by reimagining nature and the environment through a lens of sexuality and gender. Her work provides a perspective of how women shaped and were in turn shaped by their environments in the early years of the United States. In *Women, Leadership, and the U.S. Environmental Movement*,<sup>16</sup> a chapter in the book *100 Years of the Nineteenth Amendment*, McCammon et al. argue that women have been leading environmental action ever since the first conservation efforts. Mostly, the authors claim that women’s involvement inspired a broadening of the movement to include social classes that otherwise might have been left out. Whereas Taylor and Unger are concerned with the birth of environmentalism, Spears’ book *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement post-1945*<sup>17</sup> picks up after McCammon and focuses on the modern environmental movement post WWII, specifically describing how it became connected to social justice movements of the time such as anti-nuclear activism, women’s emancipation, and anti-racism campaigns. This approach to environmentalism as a concept rejects the common misconception that modern environmentalism is merely an expansion of the earlier conservation movement. By explaining the movement in the context of its zeitgeist, Spears effectively views environmentalism as a “field of movements”, an intersection of social movements, in which the role of women is an important element.

What this scholarship has in common is that it is not concerned with partisanship. It does not explore the political affiliation of the women that are being studied, although it does become clear that most of them were active on the left side of politics. Yet Republican women have been among the first to engage with environmentalism, though this intersection is still rather under-appreciated. This approach may also prove useful politically, as research has

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<sup>16</sup> McCammon et al., “Women, Leadership, and the U.S. Environmental Movement”.

<sup>17</sup> Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement*.

shown that Republicans skeptical of climate issues exhibit a greater inclination to reconsider their views on environmentalism when the persuading discourse comes from within their own partisan ranks.<sup>18</sup>

Academically this research is relevant as it contributes to two under researched fields of study, namely women on the right, and women and the environment. In bringing these two phenomena together, my thesis addresses this significant research gap and provides important insight into a fruitful field of study. It does so by utilizing two different research methods, combining historical research with social research, namely content analysis. An historical approach is valuable as investigating the development of the phenomena over time allows us to generate a deeper understanding of the roots of the issue. Content analysis in turn is useful for this particular study because of its versatility: it can be used to analyze a wide range of data sources, such as text, video, and audio.<sup>19</sup> Hence, this method allows me to qualitatively describe the complex interaction of gender and the conservative environmental movement. Furthermore, I use both primary and secondary data sources. The former is to provide an historical overview of women's roles in the development of environmentalism and the birth of conservative environmentalism. The latter consists of archival research into women's contributions to the movement, which I analyze through content analysis.

This study is led by the following research question: how have women contributed to the conservative environmental movement in the United States? While this question may look straightforward, the interdisciplinary analysis that I use to answer it is rather complex. On the one hand, my thesis maintains a chronological timeframe. In the first chapter, I detail American women's historical relationships to nature, and I argue that ordinary women have been involved

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<sup>18</sup> Blake Hudson and Evan Spencer, "Denying Disaster: A Modest Proposal for Transitioning from Climate Change Denial Culture in the Southeastern United States," *University of Arkansas at Little Rock Law Review*, 40, no. 4 (2018), p. 545-572.

<sup>19</sup> Steven E. Stemler, "Content analysis," in *Emerging trends in the social and behavioral sciences: An interdisciplinary, searchable, and linkable resource*, ed. Robert A. Scott, ed. Stephen M Kosslyn, ed. Marlis Buchmann (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015) p. 1-14.

in environmental movements since the very founding of the US. This chapter covers the period from the first European explorers in the US up until the birth of modern environmentalism in the 1960s. The second chapter describes the evolution of the relationship of the Republican Party with the environment post WWII and lays bare how environmentalism became defined in partisan terms during the 1980s. I argue in this chapter that as the politicization of the environment took place, some influential Republican women within the party remained focused on the cause, preventing the party from ever steering away from the environment completely. On the other hand, this thesis addresses several case studies of paradigmatic importance. These are discussed in chapter 3 and 4, and are grounded on primary research in the contemporary conservative environmental movement, divided into two different “levels” of American society, that mirror the levels of analysis of the first two chapters. I will call these levels “the people” and “the party”, respectively. The people/ party distinction has been used previously by scholars to analyze American history and society.<sup>20</sup> It is a useful way to structure American research, as it allows for a more holistic study of the US’ democratic, layered society by distinguishing between the ground level opinions of the citizens and the action taken by government. These two levels oftentimes overlap and mutually influence one another, therefore, although this division is useful for analysis, this study does not view them as two completely separate entities.

Throughout American history many important decisions made in the White House have been influenced or inspired by bottom-up action, especially in the environmental domain.<sup>21</sup> Through this thesis, I provide an operative example such a process, by showcasing the role and influence of Republican women in America’s environmental culture and policymaking. The conclusion, while challenging the notion that the American right has abandoned

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<sup>20</sup> Eric Foner, *Give me Liberty!: An American History*. (New York, NY: WW Norton & Company, 2005); Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States*. (New York, NY: WW Norton & Company, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Lepore, *These Truths*.

environmentalism, provides further discussion points touching upon the implications of these long-term developments for both American society and the environment.

## Chapter 1

### **American Women and the Environment: A History of People's Mobilization**

This chapter investigates the relationship between American women and the natural environment and how it changed from the very founding of the United States up until WWII. It explores the development of female interaction with nature, a process that led to forms of environmental civic engagement that were purely feminine. I argue that the most important role that US women played in the development of modern environmentalism lay in the active pursuit of environmental safeguarding through civic involvement and engagement.

#### *Native Americans, Frontierswomen, and Slaves*

In pre-colonial times, Native women, not men, were the ones that provided the largest amount of nutriment for their communities and who were often in charge of the production of crops. Historians have usually explained this through a lens of motherly caring: one Dakota woman mentioned that “we cared for our corn in those days, as we would care for a child, for we Indians loved our fields as mothers love their children”.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, many Native tribes were matriarchal or contained matriarchic elements, where the mother was the head of the family or clan. This did not imply a superiority of women over men; rather, it facilitated a more equal distribution of power between the genders and fostered female leadership, particularly in relation to nature.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> McNeill in Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Martha Harroun Foster, “Lost Women of the Matriarchy: Iroquois Women in the Historical Literature,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 19, no 3 (1995): p. 121-140; Sherry Hamby, “The Importance of Community in a Feminist Analysis of Domestic Violence among Native Americans,” in *Domestic violence at the margins: Readings on race, class, gender, and culture*, ed. Natalie J. Sokoloff, ed. Christina Pratt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 174-193.

Natives' gendered relation to nature drastically changed with the arrival of European settlers. Settlers brought intensive cultivation methods that were far more demanding of the earth and contributed to the disappearing of fauna and flora, altogether substantially altering the balance between humans and their natural environment.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, stricter gender divisions were put in place by the Europeans, sometimes even reversing traditional Native gender roles. For example, Native males were now expected to perform agricultural labor, even though the females had much more knowledge and expertise in this area. This expertise was however not recognized by the settlers as it did not produce crops at a fast enough rate and on a large enough scale to serve their wants and needs. Similarly, Native women were forced to change their relationship with nature: their ways became less sustainable, and many of them steadily became used to the settlers' destructive relationship with nature. Others chose not to get involved in these harmful practices and consciously restricted their numbers of offspring for this purpose.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, the settlers initially relied heavily on the preexisting knowledge of nature, agriculture, and trade that the Natives and especially the Native women had. Hence, when they took over Native lands, they benefited from the previous labor of the Native women, as they had made the lands particularly suitable for farming.<sup>26</sup> Although the Native approach to nature was distinctly different from European techniques, one should avoid assuming that Native Americans were one with nature, and that they had no impact on nature at all. Of course, Natives altered their natural environments as well. The lands that the settlers found were no

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<sup>24</sup> David Rich Lewis, "Native Americans and the Environment: A Survey of Twentieth-Century Issues", *American Indian Quarterly*, 19, no. 3 (summer 1995) p. 423-450.

<sup>25</sup> Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*.

<sup>26</sup> Strother E. Roberts, *Colonial Ecology, Atlantic Economy: Transforming Nature in Early New England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

wilderness, but rather cultural and natural landscapes which provided them with fertile soil, enabling them to prosper in the centuries to come.<sup>27</sup>

Although the historical literature on the pioneers' experience of life on the frontier has mostly focused on the male perspective, women were an integral part of it as well.<sup>28</sup> Diaries and reports of frontier women reveal the many contributions they made to sustaining their family life in early America. As these women were often married to male pioneers, their functions concerned primarily domestic labor. Next to this, women often worked the land, some even completely independently, just like their Native counterparts had been doing for years. Besides farm the land, frontierswomen would assist their husbands at shops, hotels, or laundry services, and volunteer at local churches and schools. Some unmarried women became involved in local politics, and oftentimes it was the women who were responsible for maintaining social relations within their communities, drawing a parallel to Native women's diplomatic qualities. Due to the harsh conditions of frontier life, strict Victorian gender roles were loosened, giving women a more prominent role in the organization of everyday life. Men and women on the frontier were dependent on one another.<sup>29</sup>

Women on the frontier thus performed many of the same tasks as men; yet ideological notions of true womanhood remained persistent. True womanhood was confined to the domestic realm, and certainly did not include nature exploration. As the wives, sisters, and daughters of frontiersmen, however, women were able to partake in such explorations nonetheless.<sup>30</sup> The beauty of the wilds encouraged many frontierswomen to study nature and write about their experiences. One such woman was Caroline Kirkland, a nature writer and

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<sup>27</sup> Lucy Diekmann, Lee Panich, Chuck Striplen, "Native American Management and the Legacy of Working Landscapes in California: Western landscapes were working long before Europeans arrived", *Rangelands*, 29, no. 3 (June 2007) p. 46-50.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Walsh, "State of the Art: Women's Place on the American Frontier", *Journal of American Studies*, 29, no. 2 (1995), p. 241-255.

<sup>29</sup> Walsh, "State of the Art", p. 241-255.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*.

urban park advocate who moved with her husband from New York to the Michigan frontier, where she wrote about frontier life. Another frontierswoman worth mentioning here is Lucy Audubon, the wife of John James Audubon, who established the prominent Audubon Society for bird protection. Lucy was the exemplar of an outdoorswoman and accompanied her husband in many of his environmental endeavors. The female approach to nature protection was less intrusive and utilitarian than the male approach: unlike men, these women refrained from employing firearms in their study of wild fauna.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American women progressively developed a more modern approach to the environment and started focusing on its idealistic protection and conservation. A need for the beautification of the rural environment started to emerge, led mostly by white women.<sup>32</sup> This version of female conservation efforts was quickly placed within traditional gender structures, as it happened primarily in the domestic sphere. It developed as a response of many women who, often involuntarily, accompanied their husbands to journey westward: they were forced to leave the solace of their neat homes on the eastern shore and trade it for the rough nature of California. Longing for home, these women resorted to “beautifying” their new environments by planting seeds they had brought from home, making the landscape more familiar to them.<sup>33</sup> One of them was Kate Elwell, who had moved with her husband to Wisconsin in the 1870s. Her letters home reveal the hardships of this new lifestyle, and detail how beautification helped her endure them. Following again the narrative of motherly caring, Elwell wrote that she loved her flowers almost as much as her own family, a sentiment reminiscent of the Dakota woman who “cared for her crops as [she] would for a child”.<sup>34</sup>

This gentle feminine approach to nature can also be found among early African American communities. Enslaved African American women developed relationships with

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid; Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*.

<sup>33</sup> Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



nature that in some ways mirrored those of the Native women.<sup>35</sup> To slave owners, maximizing productivity levels outweighed the desire to make slaves adopt their own rigid gender norms. Thus, female slaves often worked the lands and performed other forms of heavy labor. Next to this, they were considered reproduction tools, something against which many of them protested in silence. Starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, female slaves used their knowledge of nature to minimize the number of future slaves they conceived, for instance through self-inflicted abortion. Furthermore, this knowledge enabled them to provide food and medicine for their families. Some female slaves were allowed to sow some crops of their own, the mixed character of which was far more sustainable than the monoculture crops of the plantation owners. Thus, much like Native American women, female slaves used their natural environment to be in control of their reproductive rights. For both these marginalized groups, then, nature provided aid in their dire circumstances as they connected it directly to their womanhood. Such an approach shows a thorough knowledge of nature's powers and a more harmonious coexistence with nature.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Women and the Environment at the Turn of the Century***

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century marks a turning point in Americans' relationship with the environment. The early years of frontierism were largely over and the public interest started shifting from exploring nature toward conserving it. Wealthy white women contributed greatly to the early conservation movement through organizations like the Sierra Club and Audubon Society, as well as all-women's clubs, creating for instance a female branch of Audubon. The latter campaigned specifically to other women, making them aware of the environmental harm they caused by wearing real bird feathers on their hats and clothing. The large impact of these

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<sup>35</sup> Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*.

women's organizations stemmed mostly from their focus on moral pressures and networking.<sup>37</sup> By appealing to mothers and their families, the groups created sympathy among the public and established a large following. Through their actions, these women broke with the common misconception that women feared nature and should remain at the home. They enabled this transition by framing their activism in traditionally feminine terms, focusing on the caring qualities of the female.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, female novelists, nature writers, and visual artists started to reshape the traditionally male view of nature, understanding humans' relationship with nature not in terms of conquest and superiority, but in terms of harmony with the natural environment. Many women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century believed it was their God-given calling to protect Mother nature.<sup>39</sup> Thus, female nature enthusiasts increasingly came to the forefront, educating readers about conservation and later about preservation, even in public schools, from a perspective of "civic mothering".<sup>40</sup> Another term that was used for female environmental concern was "municipal housekeeping", a notion which softened the public perception of women activists by viewing their activism as an expansion of the domestic realm.<sup>41</sup> This perspective enabled women to contribute greatly to the first environmental justice efforts as well: as the Progressive Era commenced, emancipation started to shape many domains of public life.<sup>42</sup> In line with the zeitgeist, environmental conservation and preservation became linked to other societal issues, such as quality of living. One of the first environmental activists was Jane Addams, who concerned herself primarily with the unequal distribution of waste throughout big cities. It has been claimed that Addams' success, which led her to become the

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<sup>37</sup> Glenda Riley, "Victorian Ladies Outdoors: Women in the Early Western Conservation Movement, 1870-1920", *Southern California Quarterly*, 83, no. 1 (spring 2001), p. 59-80.

<sup>38</sup> Riley, "Victorian Ladies", p. 59-80.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties", *Journal of American History*, 90, no. 2 (September 2003), p. 535.

<sup>41</sup> Joyce E. Williams and Vicky M. MacLean, "In Pursuit of Justice: The Scholar-Activism of Feminist Settlement Workers in the Progressive Era (1890-1920s)," *Sociology Between the Gaps: Forgotten and Neglected Topics*, 5 (2020), p. 1-13.

<sup>42</sup> Rome, "Give Earth a Chance", p. 525-554.

first female American Nobel peace prize winner in 1931, was largely due to her incredible social abilities, which she used to link the public realm with the private.<sup>43</sup> This connection characterizes the Progressive Era as a whole, rendering women more inclined to civic engagement. Female environmental activism thus was able to gain more traction as a result of the overall emancipation movements that emerged in the Progressive Era.

### ***Women, Wars, and the Environment***

US intervention in WWI sparked nation-wide uproar and inspired the birth of a radical peace movement. Pacifist grassroots activism was carried out by citizens from all walks of life and was especially driven by women's organizations such as the Woman's Peace Party (WPP), which was founded by Jane Addams and would later be renamed the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Emily Greene Balch would become another important leader of the movement. Both Addams and Balch were later rewarded for their efforts with the Nobel Peace Prize. A major rationale surrounding the creation of such a female peace movement viewed women as the creators of life and men as the destructors, as it was men who were responsible for the outbreak of the war.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, women occupied leadership positions within mixed-gender groups like the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM) and the People's Council. The main driver for women's anti-war activism was an aversion to capitalist greed and the unsustainable extraction of nature's resources that they claimed both triggered and sustained war. In this quest, many women were led by notions of motherhood that some claimed made women especially averse to war, as they were the "natural nurturers of life".<sup>45</sup> A similar motivation would later spark the creation of the Women Strike for Peace (WSP)

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<sup>43</sup> Williams and MacLean, "In Pursuit", p. 1-13.

<sup>44</sup> Carrie A. Foster, *The Women and the Warriors: The U.S. Section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-1946*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

<sup>45</sup> Foster, *The Women and the Warriors*, p. 4.

movement, which came to life in 1961 as a reaction to nuclear power and was centered around the notion of women as “givers and guardians of life”.<sup>46</sup> Women’s pacifist sentiments went as far as to inspire some of them to go on a “birth strike”, refusing to conceive children and thus new soldiers whilst WWI was ongoing, an effort reminiscent of female African American slaves’ use of their sex as tools of protest. Women continued their anti-war and social justice campaigns in the aftermath of WWI, establishing several more pacifist organizations such as the US Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the Women’s Peace Society (WPS, 1919), and the Women’s Peace Union (WPU, 1921).<sup>47</sup> What these different groups had in common was the desire to contribute to society and the broader peace movement on equal footing with their male counterparts.<sup>48</sup>

The 1920s were marked by a rapid increase in production and consumption, which came at the expense of the natural environment. WWI had boosted the demand for oil, which was extracted from the earth unsustainably. Cities were expanding with incredible speed, and within them, a clear division emerged between the clean and wealthy white neighborhoods and the dirty black areas, where most of the city’s waste was dumped. Following in Addams’ footsteps, less affluent women as well as black women spearheaded urban reform movements, aimed at improving the health of working-class Americans by greening and purifying these poorer city neighborhoods.<sup>49</sup> Thus, environmental action became increasingly connected to social justice movements, oftentimes led by women. The invention of lead as fuel for cars and factory machines furthermore had harmful health consequences for many workers who were exposed to it, a crisis brought to light by Alice Hamilton.<sup>50</sup> Hamilton herself has claimed that

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<sup>46</sup> Andrew J. Ross, “Preemptive Strikes: Women Strike for Peace, Antinuclear Pacifism, and the Movement for a Biological Democracy, 1961–1963”, *Peace and Change*, 46, no. 2 (April 2021), p. 164-182.

<sup>47</sup> Scott H. Bennett and Charles F. Howlett, *Antiwar Dissent and Peace Activism in World War I America: A Documentary Reader* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> Foster, *The Women and the Warriors*, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Carolyn Merchant, “Earthcare: Women and the Environment”, *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 62, no. 3 (May 2020), p. 17-27.

<sup>50</sup> Williams and MacLean, “In Pursuit”, p. 1-13.

much of her success in tackling this issue was due to her womanhood: “It seemed natural and right that a woman should put the care of the producing workman ahead of the value of the thing he was producing; in a man it would have been (seen as) sentimentality or radicalism”.<sup>51</sup> This view is in line with the idea of municipal housekeeping: as women’s rightful place was considered to be the home, a natural expansion of the female caring qualities toward the environment was seen as logical and ethical. This way, women were able to secure a more prominent position within society through framing their civic action in terms of female caring.

Women’s pacifist organizations were overwhelmingly left-leaning, however not exclusively. A large anti-interventionist movement on the American right developed in 1939, when WWII broke out on the European continent. They called themselves the Mothers’ Movement and consisted of a loose network of conservative women’s groups across the country, united in their plea for the US to refrain from foreign intervention. Most of its participants were white, middle-aged, Christian housewives, ranging from moderate to hardline conservatives.<sup>52</sup> Irrespective of political affiliation however, all these pacifist organizations were ultimately unable to prevent US intervention in WWII.

The several movements of environmental activism that had been established during WWI came together and expanded during WWII, as new technologies arose that were even more harmful to both the natural environment and human health.<sup>53</sup> The invention of nuclear weapons was the most striking example of the horrifying impact technology could have on both these domains. Anti-nuclear civic campaigns thus brought together human and environmental action, and they were characterized by extensive female leadership. Through organizations such as the WILPF, female civic engagement campaigns fought for nuclear

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<sup>51</sup> Alice Hamilton, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades: The Autobiography of Alice Hamilton*, M.D. (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1943), p. 269.

<sup>52</sup> Glen Jeansonne, *Women of the Far Right: The Mothers' Movement and World War II*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>53</sup> Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement*.

disarmament using slogans like “Nuclear weapons are ecocidal, suicidal and genocidal.”<sup>54</sup> Women’s anti-nuclear activism continued to expand, and found fertile ground especially after WWII, in the age of the Cold War.

Overall, in exploring American women’s historical relationship with the environment it becomes clear that the female approach has always been different from that of their male counterparts. Women’s relationship to the environment up until the 1940s can be described as more gentle and less intrusive and utilitarian. Women have been prominent in establishing the first forms of environmental care in the US especially for their contemplative approach but also for their ability to develop networks. From the second half of the 19th century to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century then, US women distinguished themselves through environmental and social justice activism, which eventually constituted one of the main features of the modern environmentalist movement. Women’s efforts were largely diplomatic and cooperative, and played out through civic engagement among the American people.

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<sup>54</sup> “What do Feminists Think of Nuclear Weapons?” WILPF, August 6, 2019. <https://www.wilpf.org/what-do-feminists-think-of-nuclear-weapons/>

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Republican Party and the Politicization of the Environment**

In the previous chapter I described women's civic engagement regarding the environment up until the 1940s. This chapter dives into the second half of the 20th century, post WWII, leading up to the late 1980s. I argue that during this time, US environmentalism started to become increasingly politicized, and therefore women's influence over its development moved from the "people" level to a much more structured political level, which I identify as "the party". I focus in particular on the role of women within the Republican Party. This chapter shows the historical trajectory that, from the 1980s onward, made the environment an extremely polarizing issue, with the Republican Party quickly moving away from many of the bipartisan concerns it had helped to institutionalize. Still, a number of influential Republican women within the party never abandoned environmentalism, as my last two chapters will eventually show.

#### ***The Birth of Modern Environmentalism***

In the years directly following WWII, environmental activists focused greatly on the nuclear threat and found common ground with peace activists. Moreover, as a response to the atrocities of the war, the United Nations was formed, and the UN Declaration on Human Rights (UNDHR) was signed. Even though this did not explicitly mention environmental rights, Article 25 did it implicitly, and the environmental cause became framed by human rights discourse. An example of a woman highly involved in this transition to the politicization of the environment was Eleanor Roosevelt. An admirer of nature and an environmental activist at heart, she did not miss an occasion to exercise her political power in favor of the environmental cause. Specifically, she aimed at convincing Americans that nature was a common good, and

a clean environment their human right. To this end, she advocated for environmental education in US schools and colleges, hoping to nurture a generation that might be more environmentally conscious than her own.<sup>55</sup>

After WWII, a modern environmentalist movement started to take shape. It evolved out of the conservationism of the long Progressive Era and rapid changes in the industrial landscape of the US.<sup>56</sup> Although it was a slow and gradual process, most historians point to the 1960s as its onset.<sup>57</sup> In this period, the US economy was booming, benefiting from its newfound position as a global superpower after the destruction that the war had caused in the rest of the Western world. The onset of the Great Acceleration was furthermore characterized by an unprecedented increase in corporate power, a spike in the use of fossil fuels, and a shift in the production chain toward developing countries as a result of decolonization processes.<sup>58</sup> Rapid industrialization followed by WWII had made many Americans aware that there was a limit on the world's natural resources. This prompted people to contemplate about the future. An important issue related to US prosperity was the country's rapid population growth, and the future scarcity of resources that might result from it; a phenomenon that has been called the "Malthusian moment" of the 1960s and the 1970s.<sup>59</sup> Following Malthusian ideas of population growth, prominent environmentalists opted for population control programs to lessen the human burden on the planet. Paul Ehrlich's book *The Population Bomb: Population Control or the Race to Oblivion*,<sup>60</sup> commissioned by the Sierra Club, quickly gained popularity among a wide audience. It primarily advocated for stricter birth control in developing countries. Importantly,

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<sup>55</sup> Dario Fazzi, "Eleanor Roosevelt and the Nature: Bridging Conservationism with Environmentalism," in *Eleanor Roosevelt's Views on Diplomacy and Democracy*, ed. Dario Fazzi, ed. Anya Luscombe, (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 193-210.

<sup>56</sup> Fazzi, "Eleanor Roosevelt and the Nature," p. 193-210.

<sup>57</sup> See for instance Rome, "Give Earth a Chance", p. 525-554; Merchant, "Earthcare", p. 17-27.

<sup>58</sup> Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement*.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

<sup>60</sup> Paul Ehrlich and Anne Howland Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb: Population Control or the Race to Oblivion*, (New York, NY: Ballentine Books, 1968).



notwithstanding the singular attribution to Paul Ehrlich, the work was, in fact, co-authored by his spouse and fellow researcher, Anne Ehrlich. Critics of the work argued that the rapid technological innovations and consumerism of developed countries like the US were equally harmful to the environment – however, most scientists agreed that population control was necessary.<sup>61</sup>

Modern environmentalism can be described as a socio-political movement first and foremost, one that was in line with the spirit of the time.<sup>62</sup> Whereas conservationism was essentially a cultural movement mostly led by the privileged classes, modern environmentalism was a political and activist movement with a much broader support base, and a more international scope and perspective. Next to that, environmentalism, in contrast to conservationism, covered a wide range of environmental issues connecting conservationist efforts such as wildlife protection with larger issues like global warming and pollution.<sup>63</sup> Lastly, in contrast to conservationism, modern environmentalism rested strongly on scientific research. The incorporation of the science of ecology into modern environmental thinking was crucial to this shift. Ecology, described as the study of how organisms relate to each other and their environment, inspired the environmental movement of the 1960s.<sup>64</sup>

One of the main drivers of the modern environmental movement is often considered to be Rachel Carson. Carson was a marine biologist whose work was already widely read and respected in America since the early 1950s. She had been active in women's conservation groups and was on the board of the Audubon Society since 1948. Her 1962 book *Silent Spring*<sup>65</sup> marked a shift in the way many Americans thought about the environment and their

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Frank Uekotter, *The Turning Points of Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> Charles C. Chester, "Environmentalism," in *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, ed. Akira Iriye, ed. Pierre-Yves Saunier, (London, UK: Macmillan Publishers, 2009), p. 336-340.

<sup>64</sup> Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement*.

<sup>65</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

relationship to it. It addressed the harmful impact of chemicals and pesticides on nature, the environment, and human health. Importantly, Carson framed these environmental issues as human rights issues, and specifically questioned the traditional “masculine” view of nature as a space of conquest for humanity. She proposed instead a more harmonious coexistence with the natural environment. “The “control of nature””, she wrote, “is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born in the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man. The concept and practices of applied entomology for the most part date from that Stone Age of science. It is our alarming misfortune that this primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth.”<sup>66</sup>

Carson deliberately avoided scientific jargon, in order to appeal to a wider public. The criticism she faced largely came from the chemical industry, which spent a quarter million dollars on a professional campaign to discredit her work.<sup>67</sup> This criticism was of a distinctly gendered nature, and was uttered almost exclusively by men.<sup>68</sup> It dismissed Carson as hysterical and overly emotional, character traits that were assigned to her womanhood. This view was however not widely shared by the larger public: Carson received several awards, among which the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and her book set in motion a movement that would lead to an official ban on the domestic production of DDT, the chemical that Carson was most concerned about in her writing.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Carson’s work had sparked a new upsurge in environmental awareness, which many claim partly led to the establishment of Earth Day in 1970. On this day, the buildup of environmental concern that had taken place in the 1950s and 1960s reached a climax as twenty million Americans across the country participated in peaceful

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<sup>66</sup> Carson, *Silent Spring*, p. 435-436.

<sup>67</sup> Michael B. Smith, ““Silence, Miss Carson!” Science, Gender, and the Reception of “Silent Spring””, *Feminist Studies*, 27, no. 3 (Fall 2001), p. 733-752; Linda Lear, *Introduction to Silent Spring*, (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2002).

<sup>68</sup> Smith, ““Silence, Miss Carson!””, p. 733-752.

<sup>69</sup> Lear, *Introduction to Silent Spring*.

protest against environmental pollution.<sup>70</sup> The unprecedented mass mobilization of Earth Day showcases the political character of the modern environmental movement. Hence, *Silent Spring* marks a turning point in environmental thinking. An important aspect of modern environmentalism is its conceptualization of the environment as dynamic and sentient, contrasting with the previous perception within the conservation and preservation movements, of nature as a passive entity subordinate to men.<sup>71</sup>

Carson was not an outspoken feminist, even though her lifelong struggle to be respected as a female scientist and writer has caused her to be identified as such.<sup>72</sup> However, *Silent Spring* was published during the beginning of the second feminist wave and became an important work in the feminist debate at the time. In second wave feminism, environmentalism and peace activism came together.<sup>73</sup> Specifically, Carson's notion of a softer, less masculine approach to nature resonated with a common theme in second wave feminism. Many saw in Carson's work the consequences of patriarchy on both nature and women, and hence drew connections between the two: the male desire to dominate had left both women and nature suffering. Second wave feminists, then, sought to free both themselves and their natural environment from male dominance.

### ***The Institutionalization of Environmentalism***

The Republican Party is presently associated with anti-environmentalism; however, historically, Republicans have played a leading role in advocating for environmental regulation.

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<sup>70</sup> Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement*.

<sup>71</sup> Merchant, "Earthcare", p. 17-27; McCammon et al., "Women, Leadership, and the U.S. Environmental Movement".

<sup>72</sup> Smith, "'Silence, Miss Carson!'", p. 733-752.

<sup>73</sup> Joni Seager, "Rachel Carson Died of Breast Cancer: The Coming of Age of Feminist Environmentalism," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28, no. 3 (2003), p. 945-972.

Theodore Roosevelt, a Republican, was the first US President to establish a national conservation agency, creating around 229 protected nature areas during his presidency between 1901 and 1909. This was equivalent to 243 million acres of protected territory. Roosevelt's mission to conserve nature as well as to allow Americans to experience the outdoors for health-related benefits set a precedent for conservationists to come.<sup>74</sup> Decades later, when the modern environmental movement started to gain traction, it was again a Republican, President Richard Nixon, who created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s, environmental legislation was created with extensive Republican initiative and bipartisan support – examples are the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Clean Air Act of 1970, and the Clean Water Act of 1972. Moderate Republicans were most active in supporting conscious environmental policies, building bridges between Republicans and Democrats to ensure environmental action.<sup>75</sup>

The environmental successes in the political realm in the 1960s and 1970s can moreover be contributed to wide citizen support. A famous incident that received widespread attention was the 1969 fire on the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio. Oil slicks on the heavily polluted river had caught fire numerous times in the preceding century, however, at a time of rising activism across many domains of American society, this time it created public outrage. The burning river became a symbol for the modern environmental movement of the 1970s and the incident partially contributed to the creation of the EPA, the first federal bureau concerned specifically with pollution and environmental degradation.<sup>76</sup> In that same year, the largest oil spill in American history took place in the Santa Barbara channel in Southern California. Three million gallons of oil polluted over 35 miles of seawater and spilled over to the California

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<sup>74</sup> Douglas Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009).

<sup>75</sup> Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*.

<sup>76</sup> Lorraine Boissoneault, "The Cuyahoga River Caught Fire at Least a Dozen Times, but No One Cared Until 1969," *Smithsonian Magazine*, (19 June 2019).

shores. An estimated 9,000 sea birds perished, covered in oil. Public pressure urged President Nixon and other officials to visit the polluted beaches. Some scholars claim that the Santa Barbara Oil Spill partially inspired the establishment of Earth Day one year later.<sup>77</sup> Other environmental issues that caused upheaval in those years were the proposed Miami jetport which posed a threat to the Everglades National Park, and the proposed Alaska pipeline which raised many different environmental concerns, from the danger of oil leakage to the destruction of Alaska's permafrost.<sup>78</sup> The urgency of such environmental problems concerned the majority of the population, no matter their party identity.<sup>79</sup>

Especially US housewives became invested in environmental action through concerns for the health of their families.<sup>80</sup> From those residing in rural areas and being directly affected by the consequences of the widespread presence of pesticides, to scientists living in big cities who were concerned about public health.<sup>81</sup> The environment to many represented a hope of reuniting the two sides of the political spectrum, that were divided on so many other issues.<sup>82</sup> As these forms of environmentalism increased, Nixon found himself in a difficult split between environmentalism and the rising neo-liberal pressures. To remain popular among a broad public, Nixon had to perform a delicate balancing act: he needed to please the increasing numbers of environmentalists, thus preventing them from favoring his main political opponent, Democratic senator of Maine Edmund Muskie, whilst avoiding driving away his own following, which largely consisted of conservatives.<sup>83</sup> The president found himself in the

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<sup>77</sup> Lila Thulin, "How an Oil Spill Inspired the First Earth Day," *Smithsonian Magazine*, (22 April 2019).

<sup>78</sup> Russel Train, "The Environmental Record of the Nixon Administration," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 26, no. 1 (Winter 1996), p. 185-196.

<sup>79</sup> See for instance "Issue of the Year: The Environment." *Time*, January 4, 1971. The Vault; Sung Eun Kim and Johannes Urpelainen, "Environmental public opinion in U.S. states, 1973–2012," *Environmental Politics*, 27, no. 1 (September 2017), p. 89-114.

<sup>80</sup> Richard S. Newman, *Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present*, (Oxford UP, 2016); Valentina Natale, "Lois Gibbs and the Birth of a Movement for Environmental Justice," *DEP*, 35 (2017), p. 95-129.

<sup>81</sup> Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*.

<sup>82</sup> Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement*.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Gottlieb, "The Next Environmentalism: How Movements Respond to the Changes that Elections Bring -From Nixon to Obama," *Environmental History*, 14, no. 2 (April 2009), p. 298-308.

middle of the debate on regulation v. deregulation. The Nixon Administration's many environmental regulation accomplishments have nonetheless caused his term to be considered by many as the age of environmentalism in the US. In 1970, Nixon signed into law the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which created the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) as an important tool for designing environmental policy.<sup>84</sup> A few months later however, the preparations for Earth Day laid bare Nixon's dual position toward the environment.

As the environmental cause was especially alive among US youth, the Nixon administration saw Earth Day as an opportunity to gain votes among a large new demographic. However, out of fears of alienating his conservative following, Nixon decided to not personally get involved in the event. Instead, his administration would address it in speeches held by White House officials at several selected universities throughout the country. Next to this, Nixon refused to declare Earth Day a national holiday, despite the suggestions of his advisors.<sup>85</sup> His strategy proved unsuccessful, as the youth activists who had driven the organization of Earth Day were disappointed with the lack of involvement of the president.<sup>86</sup>

During his first term, Nixon supported several environmental causes – he created the EPA and signed into law the Clean Air Act.<sup>87</sup> During his second term in office however, he started to focus increasingly on the economy rather than the environment, thereby appealing to the growing number of neoliberals in the country. His successor Gerald Ford continued down a similar path.

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<sup>84</sup> Train, "The Environmental Record", p. 185-196.

<sup>85</sup> Meir Rinde, "Richard Nixon and the Rise of American Environmentalism: How a Republican president ushered in the EPA," *Science History Institute Museum & Library* (2017, June).

<sup>86</sup> J. Brooks Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment*, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).

<sup>87</sup> Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*.

## ***Ronald Reagan and the Republican Environmental Reversal***

When the oil crises of the 1970s caused major economic downturns in the United States, the public focus started to shift away from the environment, and toward the economy.<sup>88</sup> Whereas the period directly following WWII knew collective support for large government in America, opposing views started to emerge during the 1970s.<sup>89</sup> Neoliberals saw the oil crises as an opportunity to voice their standpoints, in which they were aided by a host of newly founded pro-capitalist organizations and think tanks that business leaders had been setting up since the establishment of the New Deal.<sup>90</sup> Among these were the American Liberty League and the American Enterprise Association (now the American Enterprise Institute); groups to which corporations such as General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler contributed substantially.

Slowly but surely, neoliberal views made their way into the Republican Party, and the “New Right” emerged as a collective made up of three different strands of conservatism; namely a militaristic and imperialistic group, an anti-government and pro-economy group, and the cultural or religious right, which was mostly made up of Evangelicals and conservative Catholics. Formally at odds over their different views of conservatism, these groups now united over a shared enemy: environmentalism.<sup>91</sup> Specifically, a common denominator of these different strands of the New Right was their aversion to the Malthusian emphasis on overpopulation and limits to growth. The case of the religious right is particularly complex, as this strand shared several of the same values as the modern environmentalists: both groups were anti-consumerist, anti-individualist, and against many other aspects of modern life. Moreover, Evangelicals had historically been largely pro-environment from a standpoint of environmental stewardship. However, environmentalists’ Malthusian focus on overpopulation,

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<sup>88</sup> Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement*.

<sup>89</sup> Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*.

<sup>90</sup> Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005).

<sup>91</sup> Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*.

which translated into sex education campaigns in classrooms as well as a strong pro-abortion standpoint as forms of population control, caused many Evangelicals to reject environmentalism and join the conservative New Right. Thus, dominion theology largely took over the Evangelical community, which stated that God intended for humans to multiply and exploit nature's resources. Neoliberal business leaders played into this ideology by massively funding religious television channels, in order for them to preach the virtues of capitalism.<sup>92</sup> As the religious right gained traction, religious lobbyists who felt like they were not sufficiently represented in Washington started to emerge. Some prominent ones were Paul Weyrich and Reverend Jerry Falwell, both of whom played a significant role in Reagan's presidential campaign of 1980.

In the initial stages of his political career, like most Republicans at the time, Reagan was not very outspoken about the environment. Afraid to lose an important group of voters, he was constantly juggling environmental action and economic development, much like Nixon had done before him. Reagan would support several environmental action plans, even during his presidency. However, his anti-environmentalist views were quite evident, as his economic agenda prompted him to reject environmentalists' warnings about overpopulation and the dangers of climate change. Reagan's views aligned well with the different strands of the New Right: unlike the environmentalists, he was an optimist who believed in small government, American progress and military strength, and a free-market economy, rather than limits and overpopulation. Another factor in his victory over his rival Jimmy Carter was the lack of unity in the Democratic Party at the time. This was the result of Carter's emphasis on limits, which was a departure from the left's historically pro-growth rhetoric. Thus, not only the Republican Party underwent a political reversal in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*.

<sup>93</sup> Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*.



In the 1980s, the Reagan administration enabled neoliberalism to flourish. One of the president's economic advisors was the well-known neoliberal and advocate of free-market capitalism Milton Friedman – the neoliberal think tank the Heritage Foundation was moreover involved in Reagan's politics.<sup>94</sup> In those years, Reagan reversed many of the environmental efforts of his predecessor Carter. He moreover revived an age-old anti-intellectualism on the political right, by declaring that environmentalism was a dangerous invention of the “intellectual elite”. According to the president, governmental regulation of the environment was ineffective as well as harmful to the economy and individual liberty. The “doomsday criers”, in his words, were overexaggerating the situation and spreading false news.<sup>95</sup> Thus, misinformation campaigns became integrated in neoliberalism, driven largely by interest groups as well as economically motivated corporations, which were becoming increasingly involved in party politics. Whereas previously, American leaders from both sides of the political spectrum had relied heavily on scientific progress, under Reagan, distrust and even denial of science manifested on the right.<sup>96</sup> Big corporations' response to *Silent Spring* is a striking example of how businesses fought science by denying it, to justify their unsustainable but lucrative practices. It moreover paints a picture of one of the first large-scale misinformation campaigns, which characterized Reagan's time and remained persistent within the Republican Party in the decades to come.

During those years, several influential Republican Party women provided pushback to his ideas. A powerful example is Senator Olympia Snowe, who became involved in Republican Party politics in 1973, when she ran for her deceased husband's former seat in the House of Representatives and won, at the young age of 26. She was reelected several times, and still is a Senator in Congress at the time of this writing. During her time within the party, she has

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<sup>94</sup> Damien Cahill and Martijn Konings, *Neoliberalism*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017).

<sup>95</sup> Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*.

<sup>96</sup> Mooney, *The Republican War*.

sponsored several environmental bills, at times directly challenging President Reagan in doing so.<sup>97</sup> Another example can be found in Congresswoman Claudine Schneider, who was elected to the House in 1980. During her time in Congress, Schneider had a reputation as one of the strongest environmental advocates within the Republican Party. Among her grandest environmental achievements is her successful campaign to halt the construction of a nuclear power plant near her home in Rhode Island.<sup>98</sup>

To summarize, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by environmental degradation after the devastation caused by two great wars, and an increased awareness thereof. Whereas the environment was initially viewed as a potential uniting force between both political parties, the issue became increasingly politicized under Reagan. This chapter shows that influential women such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Rachel Carson have played crucial roles in bringing the environment into the political debate. At the same time, among the Republican Party several powerful women persisted, who, even during Reagan's presidency, never abandoned environmentalism, and remained active advocates for environmental legislation. Contrary to popular belief, these women's commitment to the cause has refrained the Republican Party from completely turning its back on the environment, during the heyday of neoliberalism.

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<sup>97</sup> "Senator Olympia J. Snowe," [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov/), accessed February 4, 2024.

<sup>98</sup> "Representative Claudine Schneider (R): Voting record," [LCV](https://www.lcv.org/), accessed February 25, 2024.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Women and the Rise of Contemporary Conservative Environmentalism**

In the first chapter I have described American women's long-lasting and evolving relation with nature and the first female environmental efforts from colonial times onward. I have argued that during those early years of environmentalism, women's contributions took place primarily on the "people" level, stemming mostly from personal considerations. In the second chapter I have argued that environmentalism started to become increasingly politicized during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore women's influence over its development moved to the more structured, political level of "the party". In particular, I have explained the neoliberal shift in the Republican mindset under President Reagan and pointed out how a number of influential Republican Party women nevertheless remained invested in environmental action.

In the next two chapters, I bring the two perspectives or levels together, by homing in on the roles that conservative women have played in contemporary American environmentalism from the 1980s to the present. More specifically, I explore the ways in which women have been involved in reversing the conservative withdrawal from environmental legislation epitomized by Reagan's administration. Such a reversal slowly steered the Republican Party toward a neoliberal, deregulatory approach that contrasted with its previous endorsement toward normative environmentalism, a feature that many conservative women both within and outside the party sought to resist and oppose. In doing so, I use the same people/party division that structured chapter 1 and 2 and lay bare the interaction between both levels. Though historically grounded, this second part of my research presents a socio-political analysis, insofar as it elaborates on the development of women's roles within contemporary

conservative environmentalism, and it situates such a role in the broader evolution of current-day American society.

This chapter focuses on the “people”, who mobilize through grassroots organizations in which conservative women have been playing leading roles.

### ***Women on the Forefront: Lois Gibbs and Housewives Environmentalism***

Although American women have been involved in the promotion of environmental safeguarding for centuries, they only became visibly active from the 1960s onward. As described in the first chapter of this thesis, Rachel Carson, who authored the influential book *Silent Spring*<sup>99</sup>, is arguably the most famous female environmentalist of that time. After Carson’s example, several US women took on leadership roles in civic campaigns, especially within the aforementioned anti-nuclear movement. Randall Forsberg and Helen Caldicott are two prominent examples of influential women who together led the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign of the early 1980s. Scholars have described especially Caldicott as using her femininity and motherhood as tools to engage the wider public. Both women moreover used their charisma and communicative skills in making Americans aware of the threat that nuclear weapons posed to future generations.<sup>100</sup>

During these years, US women’s involvement in environmental action started to take other forms as well. On the one hand, environmental protection intercepted discourses of female empowerment and equality, ending up coalescing, especially on the political left, in the concept of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism rested on the notion that women are naturally closer to nature than men, and that stereotypically feminine characteristics like caring and compassion

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<sup>99</sup> Carson, *Silent Spring*.

<sup>100</sup> Benjamin Redekop, “‘Physicians to a dying planet’: Helen Caldicott, Randall Forsberg, and the anti-nuclear weapons movement of the early 1980s,” *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21, no. 2 (April 2010), p. 278-291.

are necessary to reestablish a balanced and sustainable reciprocal relationship with the earth.<sup>101</sup> Ecofeminism however, also emphasized the contribution that women could make to environmental justice and intersected it with the fight for women's rights; the ecofeminist movement therefore placed women as citizens at the center of environmental protection and can be described not only as environmental but also as a societal and ideological aspiration. Ecofeminism, in other words, connected environmentalism and feminism through issues of emancipation and social as well as environmental justice.<sup>102</sup>

On the other hand, radical ecofeminism was not the only way through which American women voiced their ecological concerns. American women across the entire political spectrum indeed denounced the deterioration of the environment through forms of political involvement and participation that some authors have described in terms of "housewives environmentalism".<sup>103</sup> From the late 1970s onward, groups of conservative housewives started to unite around environmental concerns as they perceived a direct threat to their familial units emanating from the detrimental impact of environmental degradation.<sup>104</sup> These women and the activism they prompted and the campaigns they organized all shared several characteristics. The groups were usually born out of fear and a sense of urgency and necessity – at the same time, they were animated by a sense of disillusionment with the federal government. Oftentimes, they arose in blue collar neighborhoods, and were made up of white, middle-class housewives (in some cases including their working husbands). These women lacked formal political or activist training, and their collectives did not constitute official, structured organizations aligned with any particular political faction.<sup>105</sup> Rather, they often established

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<sup>101</sup> Seager, "Rachel Carson", p. 945-972.

<sup>102</sup> Alicia H. Puleo, "What is Ecofeminism?," *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, 25 (2017), p. 27-34.

<sup>103</sup> J. Seager, *Feminist Political Ecology*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>104</sup> Newman, *Love Canal*.

<sup>105</sup> Natale, "Lois Gibbs", p. 95-129.

bipartisan groups, made up of concerned mothers who gathered around a common cause, which was directly related to the health of their children.

Family-based anti-toxic dissent was crucial to create a connection between old tropes of female environmentalism (e.g. the concerned mother) and the new realities of America's industrialized environment. These maternal concerns started being extended to the natural environment. To many protesters, these two dimensions were closely intertwined. For numerous women, particularly those within the conservative demographic who had been persuaded by Nixon that they constituted the "silent" majority, remaining silent was no longer an option when the impact of environmental degradation became visible in their everyday lives. The term "front porch politics" has been used to describe the resulting activism, implying that Americans became involved in the environmental movement as they observed the environmental devastation and its effects on their families directly from the front porch of their own residences: it was no longer an abstract issue.<sup>106</sup> Another term that applies here is NIMBYism, or "not in my back yard": action arose especially when dangerous toxins were found in one's own back yard. Hence, citizens from both sides of the political aisle became progressively more involved in forms of local environmental activism. People's proximity to environmental threats, combined with a sense that government was not keeping its own citizens from harm, was the reason for successful local action in the case of Love Canal and many succeeding cases.

These efforts were oftentimes led by women, as they were among the first ones to experience the devastating effects of environmental negligence in their everyday lives. They exposed the deficiencies and limits of the reversal on environmental legislation that Republicans had been supporting from the early 1980s onward.

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<sup>106</sup> Michael Foley, "No Nukes and Front Porch Politics," in *Environmental Protest Culture and Practice on the Second Cold War Home Front from Part III - Local and Transnational Activism*, ed. Eckart Conze, ed. Martin Klimke, ed. Jeremy Varon, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2017), p. 186–205.

One of the emblems of such a struggle was the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA), a collective, community-based, and housewives-driven effort that arose on account of an environmental crisis at Love Canal. This area in Niagara Falls, NY was a typical suburban middle-class town, inhabited by white working Americans and centered around family life.<sup>107</sup> The crisis that unfolded in the late 1970s was due to the presence of toxic chemicals that were buried in the local school district.<sup>108</sup> Newspapers of that time reveal how the public awareness of the health problems stemming from toxic waste started to increase when children and pets got sick after playing near the dump. “Not until the nightmare of the Love Canal unfolded in Niagara County, N.Y. last summer did Americans become aware of the vast dangers of ground pollution. But the problem since then seems only to be worsening”, it read in the *New York Times* in 1979.<sup>109</sup> The chemical waste had been dumped by Hooker Chemical Company in the 1940s, in what was then still an abandoned canal. Over the years, other companies added waste to the site. In 1953, the canal was filled up and the land was used by the city to build an elementary school. “Then came years of unusually heavy rain”, another *New York Times* article titled “Time Bomb in Love Canal” read. “Water tables rose – and popped a swimming pool out of the ground. A noxious brew of 82 chemicals bubbled up, scalding children and dogs, killing trees and eating through shoes. Pools of fuming liquids collected in yards. Poisons in the air reached dangerous levels in nearby homes. The chemical assault may have caused miscarriages, birth defects or other health problems.”<sup>110</sup>

The crisis at Love Canal was the faltering of the American Dream, it represented the discovery of cracks in what had hitherto seemed like the perfect picture. The textbook example of American suburban bliss was constructed upon a toxic leaking dump, and the pristine

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<sup>107</sup> Natale, “Lois Gibbs”, p. 95-129.

<sup>108</sup> Newman, *Love Canal*.

<sup>109</sup> Michael Brown, “Love Canal, USA.” *New York Times*, January 21, 1979.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1979/01/21/archives/love-canal-usa-love-canal-usa.html>

<sup>110</sup> “Time Bomb in Love Canal.” *New York Times*, August 5, 1978. ProQuest.

landscapes of the famous Niagara Falls had been poisoned and afterwards neglected. Environmentalism, now visibly connected to Americans' health and livelihoods, became tangible and urgent, and a part of ordinary people's everyday lives.

Lois Gibbs was a mother of two who grew increasingly concerned about her children's health issues, which she soon started to connect to the presence of these toxins. After contacting the authorities without result, Gibbs took it upon herself to petition among her fellow mothers to take action against this harmful waste, for the safety of their offspring. Soon, Gibbs gained the support of numerous Love Canal residents, and her case received national attention when the several protests she organized were met with police arrests. As the federal government formed a critical obstacle to Gibbs' cause, she created the LCHA to provide some counterweight.

The LCHA was officially launched in 1978 and it was Lois Gibbs' most important brainchild. The organization started out as a group of concerned mothers and soon grew into a varied collective of Americans that rallied over the same cause.<sup>111</sup> Members' homeownership and race indeed seem to indicate that the LCHA was a politically mixed collective, centered around family values, and mostly motivated and inspired by the maternal instinct of protecting their family units. A *New York Times* article of December 1978 showcases these sentiments. "Six persons were arrested today as angry residents stepped up the pace of their picketing at the Love Canal cleanup construction site. ... Two of the persons arrested were Charles Bryan and Marie Ann Pozniak, both of Niagara Falls and both leaders of the protest. ... The residents were angered over the discovery of another toxic chemical, dioxin, at the canal and at the state's refusal to relocate 54 families who live on the outskirts of the former Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corporation Dump. ... The group stopped each worker's car as it attempted to enter

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<sup>111</sup> "Love Canal Homeowners Association," Duke Trinity College of Arts & Sciences, accessed January 5, 2024.



the site. “We’re only trying to help you,” Lois Gibbs, president of the Love Canal Homeowners Association, told one of the workmen. “We’ll let you in but we won’t let you out. It’s contaminated in there.” “Don’t you know that there’s dioxin in there and it’s dangerous to your health?” She asked another worker. “You’ll be carrying it home to your children.””<sup>112</sup>

### ***The New Conservative Environmentalism***

With the contribution of campaigns like the one coordinated by Lois Gibbs, US environmentalism started shifting away from conservationism and moving toward broader issues of pollution and deterioration of air and water systems. This took place at a time, however, in which the Republican Party, now in control of both Congress and the White House, had started to distance itself from environmental issues. A conservative countermovement arose favoring a neoliberal version of unrestrained individual liberty, translating this into a deregulation that was directly at odds with the precepts and tradition of US environmentalism.<sup>113</sup> Pushed to the margins of the American political agenda, throughout the 1980s and the 1990s US environmentalists focused on global warming, and later on climate change, in hopes of producing first and foremost a cultural response to the Republican neoliberal agenda. The conservative countermovement, however, mobilized once more in response to this attempt, oftentimes challenging the validity of the science behind the environmentalist movement. This is how, according to several scholars and observers, the denial of climate science took root as a specific Republican design under Reagan.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> “Police Seize 6 Pickets In Protest at Cleanup Of Niagara Falls Site.” *New York Times*, December 12, 1987. ProQuest.

<sup>113</sup> Peter J. Jacques, Riley E. Dunlap, and Mark Freeman, “The Organization of Denial: Conservative Think Tanks and Environmental Skepticism,” *Environmental Politics*, 17, no. 3 (May 2008), p. 349–385.

<sup>114</sup> Riley E. Dunlap, Chenyang Xiao, and Aaron McCright, “Politics and Environment in America: Partisan and Ideological Cleavages in Public Support for Environmentalism,” *Environmental Politics*, 10, no. 4 (Winter 2001), p. 23-48; Robert J. Brulle, “Institutionalizing Delay: Foundation Funding and the Creation of U.S. Climate-Change Counter-movement Organizations,” *Climatic Change*, 122 (2014), p. 681–694.

Within the Republican public, however, not everyone shared these anti-environmentalist sentiments. It is important to note that the citizenry in general is oftentimes less strongly divided on politics than are the party's elites.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, although the general trend during Reagan's time was a Republican departure from environmentalism, several hardline conservatives residing in remote locations were concerned about these developments. A 1996 *New York Times* article lays bare this nuance and showcases the opinions of some of the Republicans that are often being left out when one does not look at the situation critically. "I'm just about as conservative as you can get – a Gingrich Republican – and I am absolutely furious at what the party is trying to do with the environment," says Merlin McColm of Elko, Nev., the center of a major mining area. ... 'If you're going to be a conservative, you've got to be a conservative in all areas,' says McColm. 'The Republicans have made a horrible mistake, an abominable error. When I say this, the party wishes I would go away. But there are a lot of people out here just like me, and we aren't going away'."<sup>116</sup>

Environmental conservatives were from the movement's offset a heterogeneous group. They had in common the view that conservatism and environmental awareness are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, their motivations for taking action varied. Several of these reasons have been identified in previous studies.<sup>117</sup> An important motivation was a belief in the validity of scientific research. Another reason was the fear of health risks associated with environmental issues: the case of Love Canal being the most straightforward example. Mr. McColm from Nevada cared as a direct consequence of his residing in close proximity to nature where he was able to witness the impact of climate change on his natural environment. People's spontaneous mobilization and the merging of electoral constituencies around ecological issues acted as leverage for many Republicans too – even in times of severe environmental

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<sup>115</sup> Dunlap et al., "Politics and Environment", p. 23-48.

<sup>116</sup> Timothy Egan, "Look Who's Hugging Trees Now." *New York Times*, July 7, 1996. ProQuest.

<sup>117</sup> See for instance David J. Hess and Kate Pride Brown, "Green tea: Clean-energy Conservatism as a Countermovement," *Environmental Sociology*, 3, no. 1, (2017), p. 64-75.

polarization, nature sometimes had the power to unite: “We found that we didn’t hate each other,” said a conservative sawmill manager at a 1996 gathering in Idaho of hard-core Republicans and Democratic environmentalists. “Turns out, we all like to do a lot of the same things. We love the outdoors’.”<sup>118</sup>

One of the elements that reinforced environmentalism across conservative groups was religion. Typically, religious conservatives supported Reagan and his anti-environmentalist agenda, as I described in chapter 2. However, there were some groups who rather considered their faith as a reason to care for the planet, in the name of environmental stewardship, or “creation care”. Next to this, some Evangelicals focused specifically on the health aspects of environmentalism and feared that environmental pollution could inflict damage onto the unborn. For instance, the president of the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) mentioned specifically that “pollution harms the vulnerable, especially children and the unborn.”<sup>119</sup> The EEN is one example of a conservative religious environmental organization that arose in the 1990s; another is ConservAmerica. Both initially became involved in environmentalism by opposing governmental attempts to roll back the Endangered Species Act in 1996. That year, among the protesters marching in Washington DC to save the Act were numerous religiously motivated conservatives: “people in their arrogance are destroying God’s creation, yet Congress and special interests are trying to sink the Noah’s ark of our day’.”<sup>120</sup> After this first environmental act, these organizations became increasingly interested in environmentalist thought and action.<sup>121</sup> Religious motivations also inspired the Christian Coalition of America (CCA), the communications director of which, Michele Combs, founded the Young Conservatives for Energy Reform (YCER) in 2012, and later hosted a Conservative

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<sup>118</sup> Egan, “Look Who’s Hugging.”

<sup>119</sup> J. Kleinmaier, “Here’s Hoping for a Kumbaya Moment for the Koch’s.” *Madison Capital Times*, July 29, 2015.

<sup>120</sup> Laurel Kearns, “Noah’s Ark Goes to Washington: A Profile of Evangelical Environmentalism,” *Social Compass*, 44, no. 3 (September 1997), p. 349.

<sup>121</sup> Hess and Brown, “Green tea”, p. 64-75.

Clean Energy Summit. Eventually, religious Americans from all walks of life came together and formed the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE), which is still active today.<sup>122</sup>

Conservative environmental activism, thus, flourished even during Reagan's neoliberal era, putting forward crucial objectives such as the concept of environmental stewardship and the protection of the unborn from dangerous toxins. From the 1990s onward, then, several kinds of conservative environmental organizations have been established in the US. The most prominent ones are the Green Tea Coalition (formerly known as Conservatives for Energy Freedom), Young Conservatives for Energy Reform, RepublicEn, ConservAmerica (formerly known as Republicans for Environmental Protection), the American Conservation Coalition (ACC), and the ClearPath Foundation. Some of these groups started out as (religious) conservative organizations not immediately concerned with environmental issues, which later adopted these views as a reaction to certain events; others were issue-specific groups, focusing for instance exclusively on single issues, like solar energy, as in the case of the Green Tea Coalition, which was created in 2013 by Debbie Dooley, a cofounder of the far-right Tea Party collective.

Most of these groups have tended to continuously avoid commenting on climate change as a broader concept and have been staying in the lane of either clean energy or conservation. Exceptions to this are ConservAmerica, the ClearPath Foundation, RepublicEn, and the American Conservation Coalition (ACC), all of which have been specifically concerned with climate change and environmental protection, from a conservative standpoint.

In this research I focus on RepublicEn and the ACC because in these two organizations women have been taking leading roles that are much more prominent than in other conservative organizations and because these two groups well exemplify the values of the conservative

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<sup>122</sup> See nrpe.org.

environmental movement. Both groups advocate, in their own words, a common-sense, market-based, balanced, all-of-the-above, energy independence, anti-China, and pro-innovation version of environmentalism. The terms common-sense and balance are used frequently across both organizations and are central to the broader movement. They are used to distinguish the movement from the dominating Democratic environmentalist rhetoric, which many conservatives view as alarmist and unrealistic. Both organizations embrace the free market, where American technological innovation can blossom and create novel solutions to environmental problems. An all-of-the-above strategy refers to the idea that there is no silver bullet, hence a combination of different kinds of solutions is needed. Such solutions include maintaining a wide range of energy sources, as well as nuclear energy, instead of focusing solely on completely clean sources such as solar and wind energy, in order to meet the demands of the market and keep energy affordable. Energy independence is an important part of this strategy, meaning energy sourced in the US instead of imported from abroad. This in turn ties into the conservative China-aversion, which is big across the political right and is an integral part of conservative environmentalism as well.

The following tables provide an overview of the structure of both these organizations.

**Table 1** Main Characteristics of RepublicEn and ACC<sup>123</sup>

	<b>RepublicEn</b>	<b>ACC</b>
<b>Founded</b>	2012 (E&EI)/ 2014	2017
<b>Mission</b>	“We are the EcoRight, a balance to the Environmental Left. We stand together because we believe in the power of American free enterprise and innovation to solve climate change. Together, we encourage, embolden, and applaud conservative climate leadership.”	“Building the conservative environmental movement. We work to provide young Americans with access to market-based, limited-government solutions to our most pressing environmental challenges.”
<b>Members</b>	Number: 7 Age: 40+	Number: 20 Age: <30
<b>Female participation</b>	<50% female members	>50% female members & female CEO

**Table 2** RepublicEn at a Glance<sup>124</sup>

<b>Structure</b>	<b>Motivation</b>	<b>Methods</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 team members, 3 advisors</li> <li>• A project of the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University</li> <li>• A grassroots community building effort</li> </ul>	To counter the environmental left and challenge their approach by providing conservative solutions to climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pricing</li> <li>• Carbon tax</li> <li>• Combination of solar, wind, hydro, and nuclear power</li> <li>• Educating conservatives</li> <li>• Bridging the partisan gap</li> </ul>

<sup>123</sup> Data from republicen.org and acc.eco, accessed September 2023.

<sup>124</sup> Data from republicen.org, accessed September 2023.

**Table 3** The ACC at a Glance<sup>125</sup>

<b>Structure</b>	<b>Motivation</b>	<b>Methods</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3 senior leaders, 6 leaders, 11 team members, large team of advisors</li><li>• A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization</li></ul>	To activate young people that are tired of partisan inaction on the grassroots, state, and federal levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Innovation</li><li>• Nuclear energy</li><li>• Supporting local American workers &amp; farmers</li><li>• Nature &amp; wildlife conservation</li><li>• Limiting pollution</li></ul>

Looking at these tables it is evident that both organizations focus on similar topics. Both aim to approach the problem of climate change from a typically conservative standpoint, which is based on free market principles, technological innovation, and limited government. However, their proposed solutions differ. Whereas RepublicEn primarily views pricing and the installation of a carbon tax as the conservative solution to climate change, ACC proposes a combination of solutions, which does not specifically include a carbon tax. A solution that they both agree on though, is nuclear energy. In the next chapter I will use content analysis to go more in depth on the roles that women play within these organizations.

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<sup>125</sup> Data from acc.eco, accessed September 2023.

## **Chapter 4**

### **A Gender Analysis of Conservative Environmental Leadership**

In the previous chapter I have begun to unite the two levels of analysis of American environmentalism presented in the first two chapters by exploring the significant roles that US women have played within conservative environmentalist organizations.

In this final chapter I analyze the ways in which conservative women have been involved in the modern environmental movement through grassroots action, using the cases of RepublicEn and ACC. While framing their development historically I analyze conservative women's contributions to these Republican organizations through the method of content analysis. I use data acquired from the online platforms of said groups, primarily from their podcasts, to study the approach that the women within the movement take to further their conservative environmental goals, in relation to their male counterparts. In doing so I identify two key terms that I argue embody the main difference between the female and the male approach within those organizations, namely the female approach of "cooperation" and the male approach of "leadership".

Next to this, I examine the conservative environmental action materializing at the more structured, political level of the Republican Party. Here, I specifically analyze the approach that conservative women in positions of power take relating to the environmental cause. I use the Conservative Climate Caucus (CCC) as a case study, as it is the most prominent example of institutionalized conservative environmentalism today, and it knows important instances of female leadership. Specifically, I investigate into two influential female members of the CCC, namely Mariannette Miller-Meeks and Cathy McMorris Rodgers, and compare their contributions as well as their approach to that of two of their male counterparts, John Curtis



and Bruce Westerman. I do so through a content analysis of these members' rhetoric in interviews, presented mostly on the podcasts of RepublicEn and the ACC.

### ***A Case Study of Women's Contributions to Contemporary Conservative Environmentalism Within RepublicEn and the ACC***

What role do women play within both RepublicEn and the ACC? This is the leading question of the following analysis, and I approach this question through content analysis, to complement my previous historical analysis. I test the recurrence of certain key terms used by these organizations in their campaigns in relation to gender. Based on my findings of chapter 1, I then trace historically gendered associations with certain key topics within conservative environmentalism, to investigate the potential difference between the male and the female approach in the movement.<sup>126</sup> The method of content analysis is useful for this particular study because of its versatility: it can be used to analyze a wide range of data sources, such as text, video, and audio, which I make manageable by narrowing down the scope to certain key terms.<sup>127</sup> Hence, this method allows me to qualitatively describe the complex interaction of gender and the conservative environmentalist movement. The data selection process that preceded this study is as follows.

First, I identified the overall mission of both organizations, using the information provided on their websites. Seeing as their stated missions were not dissimilar in essence, and moreover aligned with the broader ideals of conservative environmentalism presented in the literature review above, I selected the most used terms in relation to this mission, in each individual organization. As I am aiming to study the movement quite generally, I focused on

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<sup>126</sup> Anne M. Koenig, Alice H. Eagly, Abigail A. Mitchell, and Tiina Ristikari, "Are Leader Stereotypes Masculine? A Meta-Analysis of Three Research Paradigms," *Psychological Bulletin*, 137, no. 4 (July 2011), p. 16-42; Brian R. Spisak, Astrid C. Homan, Allen Grabo, Mark Van Vugt, "Facing the situation: Testing a biosocial contingency model of leadership in intergroup relations using masculine and feminine faces," *The Leadership Quarterly*, 23 (2012), p. 273-280.

<sup>127</sup> Stemler, "Content analysis".

those key terms that overlapped between ACC and RepublicEn. Subsequently, utilizing previous research on gender stereotyping, I selected four key terms that have historically been connected to a specific gender; two feminine terms, namely “balance” and “cooperation”, and two masculine terms, namely “economy” and “leadership”. In my study of the data, I noticed that two of these terms were used relatively frequently throughout the different conversations within both organizations, whereas the other two were used significantly less frequently. Based on this, I excluded “economy” and “balance” from this particular analysis, leaving the focus on the feminine “cooperation” and the masculine “leadership” as the two (opposing) key terms for this study. Backed by extensive prior research, these two terms can be considered different, gendered approaches to, in this case, the conservative environmentalist cause. I retrieved the data analyzed in this study from the resources provided online by both ACC and RepublicEn. Their outlets are news blogs, podcasts, social media, and in the case of ACC also policy one-pagers and environmental training courses.

Historically as well as socially, leadership has been viewed as a typically masculine quality, as a wide range of literature suggests.<sup>128</sup> Age-old stereotypes of inherent gender differences have made it more difficult for women to obtain leadership positions in all areas of life, as typically feminine qualities are deemed incongruous with those needed to be a proper leader.<sup>129</sup> In turn, the resulting lack of female leaders has reinforced the notion that leadership is primarily a masculine concept.<sup>130</sup> An important reason for this is that leadership is often associated with other qualities that are perceived to be traditionally masculine, such as aggression and assertiveness, as opposed to typically feminine character traits like kindness

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<sup>128</sup> See for instance Koenig et al., “Are Leader Stereotypes Masculine?”, p. 616-42; Janet T. Spence and Camille E. Buckner, “Instrumental and Expressive Traits, Trait Stereotypes, and Sexist Attitudes: What do they Signify?,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 24 (2000), p. 44-62; Ashleigh Shelby Rosette and Leigh Plunkett Tost, “Agentic Women and Communal Leadership: How Role Prescriptions Confer Advantage to Top Women Leaders,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95, no. 2 (March 2010), p. 221-35.

<sup>129</sup> Rosette and Tost, “Agentic Women”, p. 221-35.

<sup>130</sup> Koenig et al., “Are Leader Stereotypes Masculine?”, p. 16-42.

and gentleness.<sup>131</sup> A Gallup poll from 2001 shows that most Americans subscribe to these stereotypes.<sup>132</sup> More recent polls from 2021 reveal that, even though a majority of Americans today view both genders as equally competent in most areas, gender stereotypes regarding personality remain relatively unchanged since 1940.<sup>133</sup> This relates to views on communal v. agentic traits. Communal traits are compassionate and sensitive, and are usually associated with femininity, whereas agentic traits are assertive and aggressive, and are mostly perceived as masculine.<sup>134</sup> As the poll from 2021 shows, communal stereotypes have increased over the years, with more Americans today viewing women as sensitive, and men as aggressive. This distinction is often used in relation to leadership, where agentic qualities are linked to strong and effective leadership. Thus, masculinity and leadership are often linked together, based on the perceived inherent characteristics of men v. women.

As conservative communities are generally more inclined to support traditional norms, these gender stereotypes typically remain stronger in conservative rather than progressive parts of American society. For example, a study on the 2016 elections found that, within the cohort of conservative voters, the gender of one of the presidential candidates, Hilary Clinton, negatively influenced their inclination to support her candidacy, as she was perceived within large parts of this community to be violating traditional (conservative) gender roles: strong and effective leadership is not associated with womanhood.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Alice Eagly and Linda L. Carli, *Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders*, (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).

<sup>132</sup> Frank Newport, "Americans See Women as Emotional and Affectionate, Men As More Aggressive", *Gallup*, February 21, 2001. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1978/americans-see-women-emotional-%20affectionate-men-more-aggressive.aspx>

<sup>133</sup> Alice Eagly, "Change in Gender Stereotypes: What Do U.S. Public Opinion Polls Say?" *SPSP*, June 23, 2021. <https://spsp.org/news-center/character-context-blog/change-gender-stereotypes-what-do-us-public-opinion-polls-say>

<sup>134</sup> Andrea E. Abele, "The dynamics of masculine-agentic and feminine-communal traits: Findings from a prospective study," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, no. 4 (2003), p. 768–776.

<sup>135</sup> Saaid Mendoza and Marissa G. DiMaria, "Not "With Her": How Gendered Political Slogans Affect Conservative Women's Perceptions of Female Leaders," *Sex Roles*, 80 (January 2019), p. 1-10.

Whereas leadership is usually seen as a typically masculine quality, cooperativeness is often perceived as a feminine characteristic.<sup>136</sup> This is moreover evident within professional environments.<sup>137</sup> For instance, research suggests that negotiators exhibit a preference for opponents possessing feminine facial features, as they anticipate heightened levels of cooperation from individuals with a more female appearance. The first chapter of this thesis moreover underscores this notion. History suggests that women adopted cooperative and diplomatic roles in approaching nature – this harkens back to the first settlers who were aided by Native women to negotiate their way onto the land and into lucrative relations with the tribes. As it was custom to many Native tribes, the women served a diplomatic function as intermediaries, as their cooperative characteristics, historically attributed to their womanhood, were perceived by either party as peaceful or harmless.<sup>138</sup> Later, frontierswomen assumed the responsibility of cultivating the relationships within their communities due to the cooperative and diplomatic attributes associated with the female gender.<sup>139</sup> When in the 1960s the first environmental organizations arose, women were on the forefront of the strategy, using group pressure and creating sympathy among the public to gain support for their efforts.<sup>140</sup> As follows from chapter 1, female diplomatic cooperation is a red thread throughout environmental history. In the following analysis I test these gender stereotypes against present-day society.

Of all the available data sources for this study, the podcasts of the organizations I chose to analyze proved to be most useful, for the following reasons. First, the podcasts represent for both organizations the core message that they champion, as they are created and managed by

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<sup>136</sup> Leire Gartzia and Daan van Knippenberg, “Too Masculine, Too Bad: Effects of Communion on Leaders’ Promotion of Cooperation,” *Group & Organization Management*, 41, no. 4 (2016), p. 458–490.

<sup>137</sup> Eric Gladstone and Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Feminine Faces Signal Cooperativeness and Encourage Negotiators to Compete,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 125, no. 1 (September 2014), p. 18-25.

<sup>138</sup> Rebecca Jager, *Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea: Indian Women as Cultural Intermediaries and National Symbols* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).

<sup>139</sup> Walsh, “State of the Art”, p. 241-255.

<sup>140</sup> Williams and MacLean, “In Pursuit”, p. 1-13.

the leaders of both organizations. Second, the fact that RepublicEn’s podcast *EcoRight Speaks* has a female host and ACC’s podcast *Coming Clean* has a male host creates a good gender balance as a base for this particular study. Third, and most importantly, out of all the available resources within the two chosen organizations for this study, these podcasts can be deemed most representative of the conservative environmental movement as a whole, as they feature numerous conservative environmentalists outside of the two organizations.

Limitations of using these podcasts for my research are that *Coming Clean* was created much more recently and therefore contains fewer episodes than *EcoRight Speaks*, which creates an imbalanced ground for comparison, and, more importantly, both podcasts feature a disproportionate number of male guests, which creates an imbalance relating to gender comparison. Nonetheless, the data extracted is rich enough to perform this particular micro-analysis.

ACC’s podcast *Coming Clean* was launched quite recently, in February 2023. As of this writing, 26 episodes of the podcast were published. The host of the majority of the episodes is Benji Backer, the founder of ACC. Next to this, he is a Board member for the Wisconsin Conservative Energy Forum and Mainstream Republicans of Washington, and often presented as a leading youth voice in conservative environmentalism.<sup>141</sup> His views are in line with the general message of the podcast, which centers around a clean environment and clean energy, in combination with the conservative values of “freedom and prosperity”.<sup>142</sup> As often comes to the fore in the podcast episodes, Backer is a supporter of bipartisan cooperation to tackle climate change. Backer retreated from the podcast in October, leaving the last few episodes

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<sup>141</sup> See for instance Jason Plautz, “Meet the conservatives who want to fight climate change — their way,” *Washington Post*, July 12, 2021. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/conservative-coalition-fighting-global-warming/2021/07/08/a05633ba-cd2e-11eb-8014-2f3926ca24d9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/conservative-coalition-fighting-global-warming/2021/07/08/a05633ba-cd2e-11eb-8014-2f3926ca24d9_story.html); Jenna Caldwell, “Climate Change Doesn’t Have a Political Party.’ Conservative Environmentalist Benji Backer on Crossing Partisan Lines to Solve The Climate Crisis,” *Time*, April 16, 2021. <https://time.com/5955373/benji-backer-conservative-climate-change/>

<sup>142</sup> “Coming Clean,” ACC, accessed November 20, 2023. <https://acc.eco/coming-clean/>

analyzed in this study to be hosted by interim host Stephen Perkins. The guests on the show range from scientists and politicians to sportspeople and businesspeople. The vast majority of guests are Republicans.

RepublicEn's *EcoRight Speaks* podcast originated in June 2020. At the time of this writing, 140 episodes were published. To enable a more equal basis for comparison, this study examines only the latest two seasons, season 6 and 7, which combine to a total of 32 episodes. The host of *EcoRight Speaks* is Chelsea Henderson, who is also the Director of editorial content. She previously worked on Capitol Hill under several Republican senators, and, like Backer, supports bipartisan cooperation. The podcast features similar guests to *Coming Clean*.

The following analysis consists of a gender comparison of the use of the key terms “cooperation” and “leadership” by guests on both these podcasts. The tables below present the number of instances that each key term was mentioned in an episode as a necessary solution to climate change, and by whom (male/ female). Episodes that featured more than one guest were left out of the study as in those cases it is unrealistic to distinguish and isolate the opinion of each individual.

**Table 4** Mentions of Key Terms by Gender on Coming Clean in 2023<sup>143</sup>

<b>Episode #</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Cooperation</b>	<b>Leadership</b>
1	M		Al Robertson
2	F	Jessie Diggins	
3	M		
4	M		
5	F		
6	F		Cathy McMorris Rodgers
7	M		
8	F	Kathryn Kellogg	
9	F	Lucy Biggers	
10	F		
11	M		Bruce Westerman
12	F		
13	M		
14	M		
15	F	Zahra Biabani	
16	M		
17	M	Blake Moore	Blake Moore
18	M	Tim Echols	Tim Echols
19	M		Mike Sommers
20	M		
21	M		
22	M		
23	F		
24	M		
25	M		
26	F	Jessica Turner	

<sup>143</sup> Open spaces indicate NA: either the key terms are not mentioned, the guest is not a Republican, it concerns a special bonus episode, or there are multiple guests featured in the episode.

**Table 5** Mentions of Key Terms by Gender on EcoRight Speaks in 2023<sup>144</sup>

Episode #	Gender	Cooperation	Leadership
<b>S6, E1</b>	M	Alex Flint	Alex Flint
<b>2</b>	F	Catrina Rorke	
<b>3</b>	M	Chris Neidl	
<b>4</b>	M		
<b>5</b>	M		
<b>6</b>	M	Danny Richter	Danny Richter
<b>7</b>	F	Sarah Beth Aubrey	
<b>8</b>	F		
<b>9</b>	F		
<b>10</b>	N/A		
<b>11</b>	N/A		
<b>12</b>	F		
<b>13</b>	M		
<b>14</b>	M		
<b>15</b>	F	Sarah Spence	
<b>16</b>	F	Mary Anna Mancuso	
<b>17</b>	N/A		
<b>18</b>	M	Tom Moyer	Tom Moyer
<b>19</b>	M		
<b>S7, E1</b>	M		
<b>2</b>	F	Danielle Butcher Franz	
<b>3</b>	M	Ryan Smith	Ryan Smith
<b>4</b>	M		George Buchanan
<b>5</b>	N/A		
<b>6</b>	F	Heather Reams	
<b>7</b>	M		John Marshall
<b>8</b>	N/A		
<b>9</b>	M		
<b>10</b>	M		
<b>11</b>	N/A		
<b>12</b>	M		
<b>13</b>	M		
<b>14</b>	M	Roderick Scott	Roderick Scott
<b>15</b>	M		Mike Smith

Looking at both these tables, it becomes clear that there exists some overlap in terms used by gender: a clear gendered divide is absent. However, a certain pattern does emerge in both podcasts: (bipartisan) cooperation as an important solution to environmental problems is

<sup>144</sup> Open spaces indicate NA: either the key terms are not mentioned, the guest is not a Republican, it concerns a special bonus episode, or there are multiple guests featured in the episode.



primarily used by women, whereas appeals to climate leadership (by America, by conservatives, or both) are mostly made by men. In both podcasts the overlap occurs predominantly in the cooperation section. Only one exception in the leadership category is present across both podcasts: in the case of ACC's *Coming Clean*, Cathy McMorris Rodgers is the sole female guest who specifically mentions American leadership as a crucial part of the climate conversation. This might imply that other factors besides gender play a role in the likelihood of viewing leadership as a solution, as McMorris Rodgers, being a Congresswoman, holds a position of power herself. This position in this case seems to override the potential effects of her womanhood.

Considering the other category, among those who mention bipartisan cooperation as the key to tackling climate change, more overlap exists: both organizations present a general conservative climate approach that advocates less partisan divisiveness on the environment. Hence, most men support this notion as well. Notable is that an overwhelming majority of the men who mention cooperation also emphasize leadership, whereas the women tend to stick solely to the cooperation approach. This points to the important fact that, although I present these two approaches as opposites, they are not mutually exclusive. In *Coming Clean* a mere 2 out of 7 of the cooperation mentions are made by men, whereas in *EcoRight Speaks* the gender ratio is equally divided in this category: 6 men and 6 women view bipartisan cooperation as a crucial element to solving climate change. Out of these 9 women, 6 specifically mention cooperation compared to 3 who do not. Considering the gender ratio of both podcasts' guests, the majority of the women on RepublicEn's podcast specifically mentions bipartisan cooperation in relation to climate change. Out of 19 male guests, only 6 men mention cooperation, and 13 men do not. Hence, the majority of male guests does not mention bipartisan cooperation as a solution to climate change. Thus, when looking at these two organizations' podcasts, which are key media vessels for both organizations, the reassumed gendered divide

in approaches to dealing with environmental problems is supported; though the reality is, unsurprisingly, more nuanced than the hypothesis.

An interesting example of (female) cooperation within the conservative environmental movement is the interview with ACC's CEO Danielle Butcher Franz on the *EcoRight Speaks* podcast. She quite evidently delves into the importance of bipartisan cooperation in tackling climate change; she moreover implies that her organization is open to liberal points of view:

*Butcher Franz: I don't mean to say that the right of center space is the answer or is better, but I think we should recognize that the env conversation has been dominated by the left side of the isle for so long and to have this new representation and add even more viewpoints is really promising. We can move forward a lot better together than separately.*<sup>145</sup>

The secondary research discussed in the first chapter of this thesis presents women as inherently different from men in their relationship to the natural environment. Women are deemed distinct in their motivations for environmental action, as well as in their approach. Specifically, the stereotypically feminine qualities of caring, concern for others (primarily their families), emotionality, and diplomatic abilities are attributed to the historical success of female environmentalism. This first analysis of gender roles within conservative environmentalist organizations supports these previous findings. It however requires some nuance.

Though leadership and cooperation are oftentimes perceived as contradictory concepts, especially in their connection to a certain gender, it is too elementary to assume that these two approaches are mutually exclusive. An extensive amount of research exists on the benefits of cooperative leadership, or "feminine leadership styles". Indeed, scholars increasingly argue that women might be more effective leaders not despite, but because of their communal

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<sup>145</sup> Danielle Butcher Franz in Chelsea Henderson, host, "Full Ep2: American Conservation Coalition CEO Danielle Butcher Franz", *EcoRight Speaks* (podcast), *RepublicEn*, August 2023. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/7GBCRSL8SSWx8rp9DQWy4s>

qualities, through which they are able to unite parties around a common cause.<sup>146</sup> At the same time, scholars have pointed out the risks of placing gender labels on leadership styles, as this might lead to overly simplistic and outdated conclusions.<sup>147</sup>

Nonetheless, although the women in this study are less outspoken about it, female leadership in conservative environmentalism has been crucial to the current development of ecological ideologies within the American right, and judging from the recent developments such as the newly appointed female CEO of the ACC, women's contributions to the movement are increasing.

### ***A Case Study of the Second Republican Reversal and Gender Roles Within the Conservative Climate Caucus***

As I described previously, Republicans have a long tradition of environmental action, from Theodore Roosevelt, who established over 200 protected nature reserves nationwide, to Richard Nixon, who created the EPA. Several other pieces of environmental legislation received extensive bipartisan support over the years – until the 1960s and 1970s. The rise of neoliberalism, which collided with the neo-Malthusian ideas that had been seeping into the modern environmentalist movement, brought forth a transformation of the political right, which was played into by Ronald Reagan. This Republican reversal set in motion a new tradition: environmentalism developed into a partisan issue that was rejected by Republican leadership. Under Reagan, the Republican Party became increasingly anti-environmental. This trend has been accelerated during Donald Trump's presidency and evolved into climate change denial.

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<sup>146</sup> Rosette and Tost, "Agentic Women", p. 221-35.

<sup>147</sup> See for instance Yvonne Due Billing and Mats Alvesson, "Questioning the Notion of Feminine Leadership: A Critical Perspective on the Gender Labelling of Leadership," *Gender, Work & Organization*, 7, no. 3 (July 2000), p. 144-157.

However, in recent years a new, less obvious reversal has been set in motion: more moderate Republicans have begun to steadily redirect their attention to the environment, and as the previous chapter shows, grassroots organizations have arisen that strive to motivate Republican leadership on environmental issues and climate change. Collectives such as ACC and RepublicEn seek to educate fellow conservatives on climate change and propose a set of solutions to the problem that are more in line with conservative values than those championed by the Democratic Party. These civic initiatives have gained momentum through the media, and their ideas have found support among the Republican Party.

Today, the most influential Republican Party environmental initiative is the CCC, which was established in 2021 by Republican Representative of Utah, John Curtis. The caucus was created to provide counterbalance to the liberal-dominated conversation on climate change and to advance conservative solutions. In Curtis' words, the CCC aims to shift the conservative environmental debate by "questioning the method, not questioning the science."<sup>148</sup> Currently it is the second-largest caucus in the House of Representatives, with 81 Republican members. The beliefs of the CCC align with those represented by conservative environmental organizations. They can be summarized as follows: American technological innovation made possible through free market processes will have the capacity to solve current environmental problems; (clean) energy should be sourced in the US rather than imported from nations like Russia; it is imperative to adopt an 'all-of-the-above' strategy by providing a wide range of affordable and reliable energy sources to the public, such as nuclear; modern technology will enable sustainable ways to extract fossil fuels; permitting reform is essential to speed up American ingenuity regarding environmental problem-solving; reducing emissions is the most urgent goal today, and China is the most substantial obstacle to reaching this objective. The

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<sup>148</sup> John Curtis in Nick Dunn, host, "Rep. John Curtis on the conservative approach to climate change 2023", *Defending Ideas* (podcast), *Sutherland Institute*, September 12, 2023. <https://sutherlandinstitute.org/rep-john-curtis-on-the-conservative-approach-to-climate-change/>

mission of the CCC is to educate fellow House Republicans on said solutions to climate change, whilst countering Democratic environmental legislation that harms the US economy and threatens national security.

“I think what conservatives may not understand is the best policy for energy independence, the best policy for national security, the best policy for the US economy, is also the best policy for the environment. And I think too often conservatives have felt like they’re gonna be asked to sacrifice national security, the economy, affordable, reliable fuel, and so there is no wonder they push back.”<sup>149</sup>

Though women are the minority within the CCC, they have contributed substantially to the goals of the caucus, as the next part of this thesis shows. For the following analysis, I once more use the method of content analysis. I identify two leading women within the CCC and compare their contributions and environmental approach to that of two of their male counterparts. I first describe these members’ specific action points, as presented on their individual governmental webpages, and subsequently analyze their rhetoric regarding the environmental cause in interviews with news outlets, and primarily, with ACC’s podcast *Coming Clean* and RepublicEn’s podcast *EcoRight Speaks*. Thus, I demonstrate the points of overlap and interaction between my two levels of analysis, the “people” and the “party”. I hereby seek to examine whether a gender difference exists on the more structured political level of the Republican Party, similar to the one found in my previous chapter on the conservative public.

The female subjects of this analysis are Caucus Vice-Chair Mariannette Miller-Meeks and Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers, whom I have selected based on their influential positions within the caucus. The same process was applied to the selection of the male members, being Caucus Chair and founder John Curtis and Chair Bruce Westerman. Three of the four selected

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<sup>149</sup> Curtis, “Rep. John Curtis on the conservative approach”.

members have appeared on either the *EcoRight Speaks* podcast or the *Coming Clean* podcast, which enables me to combine the research of these last two chapters comprehensively.

**Table 6** Main characteristics of the CCC<sup>150</sup>

<b>Founded</b>	2021
<b>Mission</b>	“Educate House Republicans on climate policies and legislation consistent with conservative values”
<b>Members</b>	Number: 81 Age: 40+
<b>Female participation</b>	10 female members & female Vice-Chair

***Mariannette Miller-Meeks and Cathy McMorris Rodgers***

Miller-Meeks (IA-1) is the CCC Vice-Chair and moreover a member of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, where she sits on the bipartisan Subcommittee on Health and the bipartisan Subcommittee on Environment, Manufacturing, and Critical Minerals, as well as the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, as Chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Health. She is furthermore the Vice-Chair of the Congressional Western Caucus and the For Country Caucus. Interestingly, Miller-Meeks is also a member of the bipartisan Women, Peace, and Security Caucus, where she is one of a mere four Republicans among a vast majority of Democrats.

Prior to taking up her current role in politics, Miller-Meeks served as a doctor in the US Army; a job she was inspired to pursue, in her own words, after she was once treated by a

<sup>150</sup> Data from House.gov, “Conservative Climate Caucus”. <https://conservativeclimatecaucus-curtis.house.gov>

physical therapist “who went out of her way to make sure she got better. This woman’s kindness and selflessness inspired her to become a doctor so she could help others.”<sup>151</sup>

As the Vice-Chair of the CCC, Miller-Meeks has made several important contributions to the caucus. Some striking examples are the following. Together with Democratic Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester, she submitted a bipartisan resolution to install a National Clean Energy Week to celebrate and generate awareness for American clean energy innovation.<sup>152</sup> Next to this, Miller-Meeks, in cooperation with fellow Congresswomen Kim Schrier and Chellie Pingree, introduced the Biochar Research Network Act, which allows for extensive research on the potential of biochar to absorb carbon on different soil types and to boost crop production: a solution typical to the conservative environmentalist movement, as it aims to benefit both the environment and the economy.

McMorris Rodgers (WA-5) is Chair of the CCC, and the first woman to be the Chair of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. Next to that, she is the founder and Co-Chair of the Congressional Down Syndrome Caucus. Her top priorities are, as her webpage suggests, veterans, disabilities, and clean energy, specifically prioritizing American energy independence. McMorris Rodgers prides herself with a bipartisan outreach and conservative principles, and states that she seeks to rebuild the American Dream “for our children and grandchildren”.<sup>153</sup> She is the spouse of a Navy veteran and has three children.

McMorris Rodgers has contributed to the CCC’s goals in several striking ways. Importantly, she introduced the FORESTS Act of 2023, which “encourages active forest management on federal forest land by creating Forest Active Management Areas in each unit

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<sup>151</sup> “About Mariannette Miller-Meeks,” House.gov, accessed on October 10, 2023. <https://millermeeks.house.gov/about>

<sup>152</sup> “Miller-Meeks, Blunt Rochester Celebrate National Clean Energy Week,” House.gov, September 27, 2023. <https://millermeeks.house.gov/media/press-releases/miller-meeks-blunt-rochester-celebrate-national-clean-energy-week>

<sup>153</sup> “About Cathy,” House.gov, accessed November 10, 2023. <https://mcmorris.house.gov/about>

of the National Forest System.”<sup>154</sup> These areas enable commercial forest management, and the bill invites local collaboration on this, whilst financially supporting timber communities. Furthermore, McMorris Rodgers co-authored the bipartisan Hydropower Regulatory Efficiency Act, designed to streamline the permitting process for small hydropower projects. The legislation passed the House unanimously and was signed into law in 2013. She currently leads the Hydropower Clean Energy Future Act, which aims to preserve and expand America’s current hydropower fleet.<sup>155</sup>

### ***John Curtis and Bruce Westerman***

Curtis (UT-3) is the Caucus Chair and founder of the CCC. Additionally, he is a member of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce where he is the Vice-Chair of the Energy Subcommittee and a member of the Communications and Technology Subcommittee. Curtis is moreover a member of the Committee on Natural Resources where he sits on the Public Lands and Energy Sub Committees, and the Co-Chair of the Wildfire Caucus and the Biomedical Research Caucus. His priorities are managing public lands, combatting human trafficking, reducing regulations on small businesses, and energy policy. He is married and has six children.<sup>156</sup>

Westerman (AR-4) is Chair of the CCC, as well as a member of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and Chair of the Committee on Natural Resources. Westerman is Vice-Chair of the Congressional Western Caucus and founder and Co-Chair of the bipartisan Working Forests Caucus. Prior to serving in Congress, Westerman worked as an

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<sup>154</sup> “FORESTS Act,” House.gov, accessed November 10, 2023. <https://mcmorris.house.gov/forestsact>

<sup>155</sup> “Hydropower Clean Energy Future Act,” House.gov, accessed November 10, 2023.

<https://mcmorris.house.gov/hydropower>

<sup>156</sup> “About John,” House.gov, accessed November 12, 2023. <https://curtis.house.gov/about-john/>



engineer and forester, and he describes himself as an ardent outdoorsman. He is married and has four children.<sup>157</sup>

### ***Gendered Approaches Within the Conservative Climate Caucus***

The women of the CCC have contributed in several significant ways to the conservative environmental movement: concrete examples of such contributions are mentioned above. For this part of my study, I specifically compare the approach of two prominent women of the CCC to that of two of their male counterparts.

In analyzing the rhetoric of the selected CCC members, no particular gender differences in their approach to conservative environmentalism come to light. The women do not position themselves more diplomatically (i.e. seeking more cooperation) than the men. The women do not seem to express the typically feminine quality of caring for nature and the environment more so than the men; similarly, they do not refer to their womanhood in furthering the CCC's goals. Most strikingly, as opposed to the findings of the first part of this research, it seems that women within the Republican Party are not positioning themselves as more cooperative than men, and in fact are as prone to emphasize both cooperation and climate leadership as the men. Looking specifically at the cooperation v. leadership distinction I identified in the previous chapter, it seems that across the CCC there exists an evident willingness for and even an emphasis on cooperation. This focus on cooperation is present both among the women and the men featured in my analysis. Within the cooperation narrative there is a strong rhetoric of 'common-sense' solutions and a 'pragmatic' approach. This narrative is utilized both to justify the Republican aversion to environmentalism, and to convince fellow Republicans to join the conservative environmental cause despite this aversion. This strategy comes to the fore in the following interview with Miller-Meeks by *The New Yorker* in August 2023:

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<sup>157</sup> "About," House.gov, accessed November 12, 2023. <https://westerman.house.gov/about>

“We’re trying to work on bipartisan solutions. I think perhaps where there’s difference among individuals, is with what urgency people believe there needs to be change. I believe that having rapid change without having affordable available energy is not a solution. We’re trying to bring some pragmatic sense to the discussion of climate, environment, and energy. Our mission is to advance common-sense solutions that allow our economy to grow, allow our economy to strengthen and compete globally around the world, but that are common-sense solutions. ... Those policies that mandate and take away choice, are not policies I could agree with. Had they been individual bills, had we been involved, I think ... there would have been more participation and more bipartisan support.”<sup>158</sup>

A similar sentiment is proclaimed by McMorris Rodgers, who in an interview with the ACC’s *Coming Clean* podcast notes the following:

“Involving the stakeholders earlier on in the process when there’s a new project, getting those stakeholders involved in the very beginning, when you’re ... looking at all the different options that you want to take into consideration, ... will get better outcomes.”<sup>159</sup>

Hence, these leading Republican women seem to view their conservative environmental approach as more cooperative than the currently dominant progressive approach, when one considers the involvement of citizen stakeholders. Similarly, Curtis, as the founder of the CCC, underscores the significance of inclusivity in the environmental discourse, advocating for the engagement of individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those within the Republican constituency who are skeptical of the movement.

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<sup>158</sup> Mariannette Miller-Meeks in David Remnick, host, “Talking to Conservatives About Climate Change: The Congressional Climate Caucus”, *The Political Scene* (podcast), *The New Yorker*, August 21, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/political-scene/talking-to-conservatives-about-climate-change-the-congressional-climate-caucus>

<sup>159</sup> Cathy McMorris Rodgers in Benji Backer, host, “Reclaiming Wasted Time, Money, and Energy,” *Coming Clean* (podcast), *ACC*, March 2023. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/54wOePzGPwgQY0mxffb4dN>

“I think it’s really important as we talk about this, to take people where they are. And if we demand that they are someplace along what I would call a continuum, we just leave people out. ... And I don’t care where you are on this continuum, if you wanna talk about this you are welcome to come and be part of it. My members are everywhere along the continuum, all the way from ‘I’m a little uncomfortable to be here’ to ‘I’m all in’. ... They are engaging and they’re talking. ... The more they do that the more comfortable they are and the more they move on that continuum”.<sup>160</sup>

This tendency toward inclusivity is moreover highlighted on the webpages of the individual Congresspeople in this study. Miller-Meeks for instance, draws attention to inclusivity through headlines such as “Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, R-Iowa, highlighted Iowa’s role in environmental solutions and encouraged lawmakers to strive for bipartisan strategies in energy at the Iowa Memorial Union on Wednesday”.<sup>161</sup> Bipartisan cooperation on matters such as the aforementioned National Clean Energy Week furthermore attests to this. A similar strategy is employed by McMorris Rodgers, who on her webpage claims to be known for her “hard work, conservative principles, bipartisan outreach, and leadership to get results for Eastern Washington”.<sup>162</sup> Both cooperation and leadership are evidently part of her environmental agenda.

The merging of these two approaches also becomes evident in the following statement by Miller-Meeks on her attendance at COP28.

“This was my third year attending COP, and I was honored to travel with a bipartisan Congressional Delegation from the Energy and Commerce Committee, and I was honored to advocate for agriculture and American leadership in the clean energy space. As the Vice Chair of the Conservative Climate Caucus, I was also honored to

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<sup>160</sup> John Curtis in Chelsea Henderson, host, “Full Ep7: Congressman John Curtis (R-UT-3),” *EcoRight Speaks* (podcast), *RepublicEn*, September 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6RkrlXVR8AzYPqAWtDJ5cQ>

<sup>161</sup> “Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks highlights conservation efforts at Young Americans for Freedom event,” *House.gov*, April 13, 2022. <https://millermeeks.house.gov/media/in-the-news/rep-mariannette-miller-meeks-highlights-conservation-efforts-young-americans>

<sup>162</sup> “About Cathy”, *House.gov*.

attend COP and share ways that conservatives are pragmatically approaching solutions to climate by working to reduce emissions while keeping energy affordable and abundant and assuring energy security. ... Iowa is setting the example and creating systems to support and harness clean energy to secure a cleaner, healthier planet for generations to come.”<sup>163</sup>

The notion emerges that, within the CCC, leadership and cooperation are not based on gender distinctions, nor are these approaches mutually exclusive. As the extracts presented above demonstrate, the emphasis on conservative environmental leadership is championed by both women and men within the CCC. Most striking is the rhetoric of McMorris Rodgers, which I mentioned briefly in my analysis of civic organizations in chapter 3. McMorris Rodgers refers to leadership in several domains: her own leadership role within the CCC and the House Committee of Energy and Commerce, the environmental leadership of Washington, the state that she represents in Congress (“Eastern Washington is leading the way in so many of the clean energy solutions that we want. We wanna move forward nationally and all around the world”<sup>164</sup>), Republican environmental leadership (“the Republican leadership is committed to ensuring that we have reliable, affordable, clean energy in the United States of America”<sup>165</sup>), and America’s global environmental and technological leadership.

“I’m excited to be leading on the Energy and Commerce Committee in the House. I believe that good energy policy is good climate policy, and America has been leading in new technologies, new innovations that are continuing to ensure that we have the energy that we need to meet our needs, that we are ... energy independent, and that we have reliable, affordable energy, but also leading the way in bringing down carbon emissions and clean energy solutions across the board, and to be the chairman of this

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<sup>163</sup> Mariannette Miller-Meeks, “Miller-Meeks: Sharing Iowa’s story at COP28,” *The Iowa Torch*, December 21, 2023. <https://iowatorch.com/2023/12/21/miller-meeks-sharing-iowas-story-at-cop28/>

<sup>164</sup> McMorris Rodgers, “Reclaiming Wasted Time”.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

committee right now is exciting, to be able to set the agenda, to move legislation through the committee, that is going to lead us.”<sup>166</sup>

This rhetoric is similar to Miller-Meeks’, who speaks of Iowa’s environmental leadership and that of her own, as the earlier extracts show. The notion of Republican environmental leadership is evident in Westerman’s rhetoric as well. The following paragraph describes some of the groundwork of the conservative environmental mindset, and indeed hearkens back to historical times when the Republican Party was not yet associated with anti-environmentalism, as I described in chapter 2 of this thesis.

“I’m a proud conservative, and I think that makes me a better conservationist, because the word conservation is derived from conservative. Teddy Roosevelt, who was a Republican, a conservative, he was the father of conservation. ... There is a philosophical definition of a conservative, and that is someone who believes in unchosen responsibilities, or unchosen obligations. As a conservative I look back on history and I see the things that have happened in this country and that have given us great wealth, great opportunities, and innovation. I look at our Constitution, and I am a proud defender of our Constitution, and I say: ‘I have an obligation to what people before me have done, but also looking at the future, I have an obligation to the future’. And a true conservative wants to conserve. ... You use what you got and you leave it in a better state than you found it, for future generations.”<sup>167</sup>

In this paragraph, Westerman showcases the notion of caring for the environment, and of looking after the earth for future generations, which one might rather expect of his female counterparts, considering the gender research provided in previous chapters. It is an example of the dissipating gender roles on the political level of the CCC with regard to conservative environmentalism.

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Bruce Westerman in Benji Backer, host, “A True Conservative is a Better Conservationist,” *Coming Clean* (podcast), ACC, April 2023. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/1E6UOAI9He9sF8EBE3ud4O>

The conservative environmental approach is closely tied to the economy as well as to innovation. An important notion that frequently comes to the fore in the movement's narrative is that American technological innovation can solve environmental problems. "I am proud that America has led in innovation and technology", says McMorris Rodgers in her interview on the *Coming Clean* podcast. "That's been the superpower of America, that we are a very creative people."<sup>168</sup>

What can be concluded from this analysis is that at the level of the Republican Party the dichotomy between leadership and cooperation, which is historically based on gender differences, is not as clear-cut as it appears on the previously analyzed level of civic engagement. Female conservative politicians pursuing an environmentalist agenda tend to focus more on leadership as a strategy to further the goals of the conservative environmental movement. A potential explanation for this is that strong leadership rhetoric is what is expected of women holding positions of power. This is consistent with previous gender research that suggests that women in positions of power tend to feel contrasted against their male counterparts and experience more pressure to perform well in their roles than do men.<sup>169</sup> Following from that, women in political leadership positions have been found to demonstrate extensive initiative to adopt stereotypically 'masculine' characteristics, so as to prove their ability to lead in a position of power.<sup>170</sup>

Additionally, contrary to my expectations stemming from the historical gender and environmental research presented, it can be derived from this analysis that women within the Republican CCC are not more diplomatic and do not approach their environmental goals from a more feminine perspective than their male counterparts. Neither do they refer specifically to

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<sup>168</sup> McMorris Rodgers, "Reclaiming Wasted Time".

<sup>169</sup> See for instance Theodore W. McDonald, Loren L. Toussaint, and Jennifer A. Schweiger, "The Influence of Social Status on Token Women Leaders' Expectations About Leading Male-Dominated Groups," *Sex Roles*, 50 (March 2004), p. 401-409.

<sup>170</sup> Manuela Tremmel and Ingrid Wahl, "Gender stereotypes in leadership: Analyzing the content and evaluation of stereotypes about typical, male, and female leaders," *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14 (January 27, 2023), p. 1-17.

their womanhood in furthering these goals. Their concrete contributions to the movement are substantial, though frequently overlooked; however they do not deviate from those of their male colleagues exclusively on the basis of traditional gender roles.

## Conclusion

As environmental problems keep surging, the highly polarizing character of the contemporary environmental movement within one of the most influential nations of the world has been a matter of concern for environmental scholars, activists, and legislators alike.<sup>171</sup> The politicization of the environment imposes a significant impediment on environmental initiatives in the US. This is why the development of conservative environmentalism calls for more in-depth research into the historical roots of environmentalism and its politicization: I undertook this study to address a significant gap in environmental scholarship, located in the intersection of women studies and conservative history. Understanding the roles that conservative women have been playing in the development of the environmentalisms of the US up until today is crucial to address the political polarization regarding environmental problems in the country. This is particularly important considering previous research findings that suggest that environmental skepticism among the American right might be most effectively targeted through persuasive messaging from within the conservative ranks.<sup>172</sup> Conservative women have been able to utilize outside perceptions of their womanhood to further their environmental cause among fellow conservatives. My thesis thus contributes to a previously unexplored field by providing answers to the question, how have women contributed to the conservative environmental movement in the United States?

Through historical research I have shown that women have played significant roles in the development of American environmentalism by using their womanhood and their feminine qualities such as cooperativeness and communication skills to their advantage. My socio-political analyses of women within two levels of analysis, namely the conservative public and the Republican Party, have nuanced this historical view and laid bare gendered distinctions in

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<sup>171</sup> Frank Newport, “Update: Partisan Gaps Expand Most on Government Power, Climate,” *Gallup*, August 7, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/509129/update-partisan-gaps-expand-government-power-climate.aspx>

<sup>172</sup> Spencer, “Denying Disaster”, p. 545-572.



the conservative environmental approach in the form of the paradigms of leadership and cooperation. Within the contemporary civic organizations RepublicEn and the ACC, a clear gender difference exists as the women in my study are more likely to take a cooperative approach in addressing the issue of climate change, whereas the men are more prone to appealing to effective environmental leadership. This distinction seems to dissipate as women obtain more power, which might explain the near absence of these distinct approaches within the party.

The theoretical framework of leadership/ cooperation is a useful way to analyze female contributions to the conservative environmental movement because of the traditionally gendered connotations of these concepts, which align with conservative views. Naturally, other factors such as convenience, desire to acquire public prominence, and personal political objectives determine women's contributions as well; however, I argue that the leadership/ cooperation paradigm can be considered an overarching gender-based framework. Through this framework, I have added nuance to the common historical lens of female environmentalism as "concerned motherhood" or "housewife activism".

This thesis shows that historically as well as currently, American conservative women have exercised effective environmental leadership and promoted crucial cooperation on the issue both in civic engagement and on the more structured political level of the Republican Party. Next to this, my research implies that traditional gender distinctions are shifting, even among the conservative public, creating new potential for female leadership on environmentalism in the future. Lastly, through this thesis I wish to provide some counterbalance to the current skepticism relating to environmental (in)action as a result of US polarization by laying bare this subtle yet important shift in the conservative mindset relating to the environment.

Limitations to this study include the limited scope of the data used, due to the recent development of the movement and a resulting shortage of useful material. Another limitation concerns the methodology. Investigating this topic using gender studies methods might result in a more thorough explanation of the gender dynamics discussed in this thesis. Furthermore, it should be noted that this thesis is concerned with only the two traditional genders of the female and the male, and thus does not include a more nuanced picture of the gender range of the LGBTQIA+ community. Lastly, the limited scope of my content analysis constitutes another constraint: future research might investigate into conservative women's environmental contributions through other organizations than the ones explored in this thesis and use data from different types of media besides podcasts.

As the environment remains one of the most politically divisive issues in American society, the slow but gradual shift back toward environmentalism within some Republican ranks is a notable development. It will be interesting to observe the trajectory and evolution of the movement in the years to come.

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