

Appendix G:

Is Everything Political? Use of Narrative Frames to Shape Energy Transition Politics

The opening pages of this book express the worry that the core of its political analysis “may be anathema to” many of the energy and climate podcasters, bloggers, and writers who help frame today’s energy policy debate. The sorting of American voters into separate political realities, explained in Chapters 3 and 4, drives that worry. Within these various communities members embrace the dominant belief with such commitment and and certainty that they find it extremely difficult to engage critical challenges to that belief. That, in turn, denies them a fuller understanding of just how starkly these communities of belief differ from one another, *even within the climate coalition*.

This appendix aims to give readers a fuller sense of those differences in three ways. The **first section** focuses on how trying to reconcile climate activism with social justice activism can skew understanding of energy transition challenges. As briefly noted in *Climate of Contempt*, identity-based justice narratives do not dovetail as neatly with energy transition goals as some might suppose (or want). This appendix delves into that issue a little more deeply.

The **second section** recounts some of the reactions of pre-publication reviewers to earlier drafts of the book manuscript. (I have omitted any information that would identify individual commenters.) The draft was circulated to a group of about 50 reviewers, mostly scholars. This group represented the ideological breadth of the climate coalition (as I defined that term in Introduction). Some readers may find the ideological variety of reviewers’ reactions to the earlier manuscript as surprising and illuminating as I did.

The **third section** contains additional examples of online influencers (those with more than 50,000 Twitter/X followers) posting in ways that discourage their followers from engaging differing perspectives. These examples further illustrate how experts’ rhetoric sometimes delegitimizes opposing views and/or those who hold them (or tries to), as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

1. IDENTITY-BASED JUSTICE NARRATIVES & ENERGY TRANSITION POLICY

Some members of the climate coalition embrace an identity-based definition of politics and political history. That identity may be based on race, class, sex, ideology, or partisanship. Their view of the history of the energy regulatory state is very different from that described in Part I of *Climate of Contempt*, as is their view of the path forward. When these views are embraced with sufficient certainty, they can make the holders resistant to engaging research that challenges their world view. Political histories framed around group identity shine a light on the role of bigotry in political and economic decision making and challenge the illusion of neutrality in the operation of markets or the law. They may imagine alternative, more equitable historical paths that might have existed but for those injustices. There is a tendency in these histories to sometimes caricature markets in ways that mirror how public choice scholarship caricatures politics and government. (Regarding the latter set of caricatures, see Chapter 2 and Appendix C.) Even though *homo*

economicus is not a full or complete explanation of human behavior, it is nevertheless an important *part* of human nature, one that ought not to be overlooked when developing identity-based explanations of historical events.

When influencers argue that the climate problem is the product of racism and the patriarchy,¹ that is a macro level claim about the past and how it might have been different absent those sociopolitical forces. It is an *empirical* claim about the kind of energy economy the world would have now if not for the ways in which sexism, racism, and colonialism have affected pivotal decisions in the past. We can engage in informed speculation whether a U.S. society free of racism and patriarchy would have emitted more or fewer GHGs than the one we have now, but that is speculation, and it offers the shakiest of foundations for policy decisions today.

Political Economy, Identity, and History

Macro-social forces like colonialism and racism manifest not only through legal and political institutions, but also through social norms: individual decisions to discriminate on the basis of race, sex, or class. Some recent histories aim to focus attention on how historians have overlooked these effects in the past, in part *because* they may have exerted a sort of permeating, osmotic influence over decisions through norms that the historian employed, perhaps unconsciously. Economic histories that ignore the power of those norms miss something important, and so invite this kind of critical examination.

We can recognize and lament unfairness, repression and exploitation of the economically vulnerable and social underclasses in the past and the present. But revisionist histories that simply credit macro-social forces with determining outcomes without tracing the particulars of causation do not tell us much about what produced the status quo. Understanding causation requires grappling with actions and motives of individuals – the political and economic actors whose choices created the status quo. It also involves grappling with other causal forces that might have produced the unwanted outcomes. In the case of the history of energy policy, one of those forces is the dependence of governments on access to affordable supplies of capital. Without that kind of analysis, revisionist explanations of the past remain incomplete.

While working on this book I read two excellent, thought-provoking histories that raised this issue: (i) Ada Ferrer’s Pulitzer Prize-winning history of Cuba² and (ii) Joey Fishkin’s and Willie Forbath’s excellent constitutional history of the United States,³ which is cited in several places in *Climate of Contempt*. Fishkin and Forbath aim to resurrect a distributional equity-focused tradition in American constitutional interpretation, one the authors call the “democracy of opportunity” tradition. The Ferrer book offers a history of Cuba aimed at U.S. readers, but one that puts American economic exploitation of the island at the center of the analysis. In so doing, Ferrer’s history is kinder to Castro’s revolution than conventional wisdom has been. As an avid reader of

¹ Echoing a common refrain on social media, Jane Fonda made this claim in a panel at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival. A keyword search of social media platforms will reveal that her view is not uncommon.

² Ada Ferrer, *Cuba: An American History* (New York: Scribner, 2021). Ferrer urges that we reconsider use of the term “American” to refer to the United States, since it applies accurately to the entire western hemisphere. I tried to edit my book to comply, but found myself unwilling to make the change where it injected awkward phrasing. Of course, her perfectly fair point is that we need to change norms in ways that eliminate the perceived awkwardness of those changes.

³ Joseph Fishkin and William Forbath, *The Anti-Oligarchy Constitution: Reconstructing the Economic Foundations of American Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022).

political and economic histories, I thoroughly enjoyed both books. But I also found myself wanting each to tackle more directly the traditional economic analyses they were challenging.

In her history of Cuba, Ferrer does not ignore the economic downside of the Cuban Revolution for Cubans. But neither does she humanize it the way she does its socioeconomic upside. Ferrer documents in detail the many benefits provided by the Cuban revolutionary state to members of the historical underclasses who had been ignored or exploited by previous regimes: health care, jobs, public services, and a new sense of social equality. On the other hand, Ferrer addresses Cubans' economic suffering under Castro mostly indirectly, with general descriptions of groups who were unhappy with the Castro regime:

A long ago historian of other revolutions once suggested the intensity of a revolution could be calculated objectively, dispassionately ... [b]y counting the number of people who fled it. In Cuba, a lot of people left.⁴

But even here, Ferrer's language is circumspect. She speaks about the revolution's "intensity," not about the pain or deprivation that motivated refugees to flee. She focuses on the fact that many were supporters of the brutal dictator Batista, and/or middle-class professionals whose property or livelihoods were threatened. Those too poor to escape safely are mentioned, but their sufferings are not a focus.

Similarly, Ferrer devotes a part of one chapter to exploring the decades long financial and trade policy support the Soviet Union provided to Cuba, which enabled the Cuban state to provide these benefits.⁵ But nowhere does she grapple critically with the question of what the Revolution might have been like for regular Cubans without those massive Soviet subsidies. Would Cubans have suffered like the citizens of other Latin American governments whose access to foreign capital was cut off after their uncompensated expropriation of foreign investments? Perhaps Ferrer's objective -- to rebalance the historical evaluation of the Cuban Revolution -- accounts for her avoidance of a deeper dive into that issue. But the relative lack of attention to this dimension of the Cuban Revolution still seems like an omission.

Fishkin and Forbath are more attentive to traditional economic forces in their analysis. They weave macro-social forces like racism into their narrative without expelling *homo economicus* from human nature, or market forces from their visions of what a democracy of opportunity might look like today. Laudably, their treatment of the Founding period re-humanizes both Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. (The former's recent lionization in popular culture has washed away aspects of both men's humanity in the public mind.⁶) Fishkin's and Forbath's treatment of the formation of 18th century political parties is similarly intellectually honest, noting that the Jeffersonian Republicans and Jacksonian Democrats were populist anti-oligarchy movements in the democracy of opportunity tradition *and* also deeply racist.

But even Fishkin and Forbath don't fully engage other historians' claims that Hamilton's mercantilist vision of the economic future was the more practical and accurate one, or that Hamilton appreciated (in ways Jefferson did not) the new nation's dependence on foreign capital and the importance of incentivizing foreign investment and trade to new nation's economic

⁴ Ferrer, *Cuba*, at p. 401.

⁵ *Id.*, at 436-438.

⁶ Jennifer Schuessler, 'Hamilton' and History: Are they In Sync, N.Y. Times (April 10, 2016)(summarizing historians' reaction to the musical).

progress. Historians and the biographers of the early Federalists⁷ credit Hamilton's foresight with laying the foundation for the modernization, industrialization, and diversification of the U.S. economy. The inexorable and historic dependence of governments on private capital was the central point of Niall Ferguson's bestseller, *The Ascent of Money*.⁸ As described in exhaustive detail by historians Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, that dependence represented the core of Alexander Hamilton's political economic vision for the United States.⁹ It was also a central driver of the 19th and 20th century policy choices that made the modern energy regulatory state, as described in Chapter 1 of *Climate of Contempt*.

Governments' dependence on private capital *does* allow holders of capital to exert leverage over those who need capital -- governments and borrowers alike. Nevertheless, the era of the New Deal Consensus shows us that a more egalitarian political economy is possible under the right political conditions. It is therefore important for scholars who explore more egalitarian alternative historical trajectories to engage fully the question of how those trajectories might have affected citizens' well-being by affecting governments' access to capital.¹⁰ Reading Fishkin and Forbath, I found myself looking for more of a response to analyses like those offered by Elkins, McKittrick and Ferguson as a counterweight to their thoughtful exploration of how Federalist policies established conditions under which economic inequality could grow.

This question of access to capital is, of course, crucial to the energy transition because of the massive amounts of investment in new energy infrastructure that a timely transition requires. As discussed in the book and Appendix C, the missing money problem and barriers to entry hinder the ability of competitive electricity markets to generate that investment. Enacting policies that direct capital investment toward energy transition objectives *and* seek a less unequal distribution of wealth requires grappling with today's political economic realities. Unfortunately, part of the progressive response to the problem of dependence on private capital assumes those problems away, by way of a heterodox macroeconomic theory known as modern monetary theory (MMT). MMT suggests that the U.S. government can finance virtually unlimited spending on new energy infrastructure by increasing the money supply rather than taxing or borrowing.

MMT offers a way out of governments' historical dependence on private investment capital. Proponents of MMT acknowledge that its practice would hasten inflation. This is a feature, not a bug. Inflation, they argue, would reduce inequality in the distribution of wealth by devaluing money, thereby devaluing debt owed by borrowers to lenders. However, recent experience tells

⁷ See for example Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005); Willard Sterne Randall, *Alexander Hamilton: A Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004); Stanley Elkins & Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁸ Niall Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World* (Penguin Books 2008).

⁹ Stanley Elkins & Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ At the same time, anti-capitalist reviewers of the book lamented that Fishkin and Forbath stopped short of calling extreme levels of economic inequality a structural feature of capitalism. See e.g., Hilary Hogan, Review of Joseph Fishkin & William E. Forbath, *The Anti-Oligarchy Constitution: Reconstructing the Economic Foundations of American Democracy*, *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 21: 386–390 (Jan. 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/moad023>; Augustus Cochrane, Review of Joseph Fishkin & William E. Forbath, *The Anti-Oligarchy Constitution: Reconstructing the Economic Foundations of American Democracy*, *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books* (December 2022); and Evan Bernick, Review of Joseph Fishkin & William E. Forbath, *The Anti-Oligarchy Constitution*, *The New Rambler* (May 2022).

politicians that inflation is most unpopular with those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, making MMT look unattractive to politicians whose primary concern is re-election.

Energy Justice & Environmental Justice

Researchers addressing environmental justice and energy justice issues through a progressive lens are increasingly crediting identity-based macro-social forces with driving energy injustice. This is a growing subset of a scholarly literature on environmental justice that dates to the late 20th century. For example, one recent analysis from Greenpeace researchers asserts that individual decisions about where to live or where to put a polluting facility, for example, are driven by racism and colonialism. In their review of the existing literature on siting polluting infrastructure, the authors frame the problem this way:

Critical environmental justice studies emphasize the inherently intersectional nature of the problem ... *With debates about the existence of environmental injustice largely settled, ...[s]cholarship has sought to situate EJ in the context of racialized capitalism and settler colonialism.*¹¹

But the highlighted language misrepresents the prior research on the causes of racially disparate pollution burdens, and steers attention away from empirical examination of the very individual decisions we need to understand in order to address energy and environmental injustice effectively.

According to the authors, it does not matter whether companies selected sites for polluting facilities based on factors other than racial animus, such as economic factors or to avoid political opposition. Nor does it matter whether polluting facilities were placed disproportionately in minority neighborhoods at all: or if instead the racial makeup of those neighborhoods changed after the facility was built. What matters, say the authors, are the racial disparities in income and political power that drive these outcomes. In this telling, that history of “racialized capitalism” defines disparate pollution impacts as a form of “violence” perpetrated by the fossil fuel industry against communities of color, irrespective of what drove the many individual choices that actually created those outcomes.¹²

It is certainly true that fossil fuels extracted by western corporations from colonial or impoverished independent nations were made less expensive by massive inequalities in bargaining power, especially in the past. It is equally true that the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and racial discrimination influences the distribution of economic and political power today, which in turn influences the distribution of harm from polluting facilities. All else equal, individuals who carry that legacy have less of the economic and political leverage necessary to avoid living in the path of pollution. The set of people carrying that legacy today is not perfectly correlated with race or ethnicity, but it is correlated.

But there are ways of acknowledging that legacy *and* reckoning with the fascinating, well-developed academic literatures that trace the causes of these outcomes more closely and carefully. Those literatures examine both intra- and cross-jurisdictional political conflict over siting polluting facilities in the United States. Readers who are interested in a deeper dive into this literature can compare my older reviews of that literature ([here](#) and [here](#)) with the literature review in the

¹¹ Timothy Q. Donaghy, Noel Healy, Charles Y. Yang, and Colette Pichon Battle, Fossil fuel racism in the United State: How phasing out coal, oil and gas can protect communities, Energy Research & Social Science, 100:103104 (2023)

¹² Id., at _.

Greenpeace authors ([here](#)). Readers interested in the history of extractive industries' role in historical colonial oppression and its modern analog, "the oil curse," should read Daniel Yergin's *The Prize* and Michael Ross' *The Oil Curse*, respectively.

Unfortunately, macro-level claims that historic racialized capitalism causes today's environmental injustice, like the Greenpeace analysis, are presented as accepted wisdom. They explain and condemn the status quo in ways that ascribe bias to key decision-makers without attempting to examine those individual decisions. Micro level claims about energy justice, on the other hand, can be tested. For example, when Senator Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) alleged on Twitter that the "Biden climate agenda" will "kill" one million oil and gas jobs by 2022,¹³ That is an empirically testable claim. (The Biden agenda has done no such thing.) And we can test the rejoinder to Blackburn's tweet from one anonymized Twitter/X account: "*Don't you mean 1M white men will lose their jobs?*"¹⁴ It turns out that this claim is based upon a common (partial) misperception.¹⁵ It accurately reflects that oil field workers are overwhelmingly male (95%) but is otherwise inaccurate (see table below).

	Oil Field Workers	American Citizens
White	60.6%	59.3%
Hispanic	21.9%	18.9%
Black/African-American	9.9%	12.6%
Other	7.6%	9.2%

Furthermore, because the transition will reduce climate harm that *tends* to fall disproportionately on poorer people, some incorrectly assume that social justice goals and energy transition goals are easily reconciled. But as noted in Chapter 5, the unequal distribution of wealth and political power makes it difficult for the economically disadvantaged to avoid injustice *during and after* the energy transition, just as it has in the past. One of the anonymous Columbia University Press reviewers urged more attention to the effects of the transition on Indian tribes. As noted in Chapter 5, tribal land has tremendous renewable energy potential, suggesting that tribes can benefit from the transition. On the other hand, tribes like the Navajo and Southern Utes will lose revenue and jobs from the decline of the fossil fuel economy, as will the Inuit people in Alaska. This is one of myriad ways in which the energy transition dovetails imperfectly with the economic interests of ethnic groups who experienced discrimination or repression by organs of U.S. government.

Knowing that national policy outcomes tend to reflect the preferences of wealthy people, and that the climate coalition tends to be wealthier than the population as a whole, we ought to guard vigilantly against policy choices that could disadvantage those who are underrepresented in policy decisions. That is a large part of the reason why the analysis in Chapter 6 recommends

¹³ Tweet from Marsha Blackburn, 2/8/21. Her prediction, unsurprisingly, has not come true.

¹⁴ Tweet from "Punchus Pillattes" 2/8/21.

¹⁵ This echoes a remark I heard from a respected colleague and friend: "*Let's face it. When we talk about lost oil and gas jobs, we are talking about white men.*"

avoiding these dangerous assumptions by engaging those among the economically vulnerable who worry that their ox will be gored by the energy transition.

2. MANUSCRIPT REVIEWER REACTIONS

As noted above, the group of people to whom I submitted earlier versions of the book manuscript comprised a mix of progressives, on the one hand, and moderates (Democrats, Independents, and conservative moderates), on the other. I consider all of them to be thoughtful and analytical, and I guessed that all oppose the anti-intellectual, bigoted brand of authoritarian right populism that Donald Trump has come to symbolize. The book was also reviewed by two anonymous reviewers selected by Columbia University Press. The input I received from all these people greatly improved the final manuscript; but it also revealed the widely divergent assumptions and understandings that exist within the climate coalition.

Combatting Ideological Myopia

The “whose side are you on?” problem is by now embedded in climate dialogue, and most energy and climate experts are acutely conscious of it. Some commenters reported a concern that their like-minded friends or colleagues might not be to engage propositions advanced in the book because they had already firmly rejected those propositions, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. These were constructive suggestions aimed at circumventing the kind of close-mindedness about climate policy that might turn people away from the book, and they came from both ideological wings of the climate coalition.

For example, **Reviewer A** said this:

*Although I do not personally disagree with what you say in Introduction, **I worry that its overall thrust will turn some readers away from reading the book**—the very readers that you need to reach the most. ...*

*To balance your discussion, should you choose to do so, **I would take aim at ... [l]eft-wing extremists like Bill McKibben and pols like Markey, AOC, and Sanders and extreme left-wing interest groups, some of which are climate activists.***

On the other hand, **Reviewer B** said this:

*Chp. 1 – Re: the statement about “eschewing ridicule for patient engagement,” **I think many who you are trying to reach will read this and immediately push back in their mind under the umbrella “there’s no time for patience - this is urgent.”** You may want to say something up front to defuse or postpone that argument because you could lose some [readers] there.*

These two reviewers each saw extremism within their party as a reasonable reaction to extremism in the other. **Reviewer A:**

*In my opinion, **we might not have some of the goofy Republicans in Congress if it were not for the Dems putting up with people like Markey, AOC, Sanders, etc.** And I think Greta has actually done more harm than good.*

Reviewer B:

Might the tribalism in one party, ie the Democratic party, be more of a reaction to what has transpired in the Republican party? Not something that would have occurred in absence of that?

Reviewer C agrees with Reviewer B:

*I think there is a tendency in the [manuscript] to frame the discussion a little bit **too much as if this is a both sides issue, when the main problem is mostly one of the Republicans** having elevated opposition to action on climate change into a source of partisan identification. ...*

On the subject readers being unwilling to engage the argument, **Reviewer D** worried that some of the factual premises of the argument were overstated in ways that might turn off some readers:

*[Regarding the statement that] "failure to chart a path to net zero represents a failure of governance" ... this hinges on **statements like "disturbing accuracy of [climate science's] predictions to date" (I know people who would argue the opposite) and "We know the harmful effects ... will continue". I'm not sure there are references for this or that if there were they would be appreciated by everyone.***

And regarding earlier drafts of the discussion of economic inequality in the book's Introduction:

***Is this really "historic economic inequality"? Citation?** Graph on page 11 goes back to 1900 but is that far enough? And, I would add a cite for the sentence that starts with "The industry has promoted climate science disinformation"*

Reviewer F said this about turning off potential readers:

*I agree that if we don't take these tradeoffs to heart we can become dismissive of those who raise them. And **I think you have empathy people who fall into that trap. [But] you need to show that empathy more, even as you criticize that reaction.***

On Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up Explanations of Today's Politics

Some reviewers simply don't believe the research discussed in Chapters 1, 4 and 5 showing that partisan tribalism is driving politicians' behavior, or that negatively partisan rhetoric that activates one party's base simultaneously activates the other, perhaps even more strongly. Rather, they believe that economic interests will drive voting behavior such that that the Inflation Reduction Act will transform climate politics. For example,

Reviewer D:

I don't think it is accurate to describe this as a product of either (1) bottom up polarization on both sides or (2) bottom up polarization by Republicans. ... That emergent opposition might be a natural consequence of renewables becoming a more real threat to the economic interests of fossil fuel companies ...

*I also don't see nearly enough grappling with the momentous importance of the Inflation Reduction Act in the manuscript ... **I think you need a stronger argument for why we still need regulation after the IRA.** I think the key problem going forward is that there isn't an*

*incentive to rapidly phase out gas or capture CO₂ at gas plants in the absence of regulation. If you believe the discussion in [Ezra] Klein's podcast, EPA promulgation of a rule that all fossil fuel power stations need to install CCS is the only strategy that will survive judicial review. **I think the IRA will put us in a position to pass more meaningful legislation later on by changing preferences in key geographies ...***

*... I tend to agree with David Roberts that the only way through is for Republicans who tout anti-climate perspectives to consistently lose elections.... **The solution isn't persuading the unpersuadable but mobilizing the pro-climate supra majority to vote and overcome problems of gerrymandering and voter suppression. That doesn't require demonization of Republicans, but it is a more intentional strategy to get the vote out.***

Similarly, **Reviewer F** said this:

You need to make more persuasively the case that social media is driving negative partisanship – to illustrate better that people who think they are playing a social media game are in fact having a pernicious effect, and getting in the way of constructive debate.

However, the academic commenter who was most familiar with the relevant scholarly literature on drivers of congressional behavior was **Reviewer E**. Reviewer E endorsed the treatment of the political science literature in Chapters 2 through 5. In response to my request that Reviewer E identify errors or omissions, **Reviewer E** said “*there’s nothing that set off any major alarm bells in terms of your summation of the literature, debates, etc.*”

I also consulted two professional lobbyists, one who lobbied Congress and another who lobbied a state legislature. I asked each this question: *What drives the legislators to adopt ideologically extreme positions?* **Lobbyist #1** answered this way:

Why do GOP legislators say and do those crazy things? Because they are competing to please their ‘base.’ It’s partly an act. Voters love that stuff.

Lobbyist #2 answered similarly, and elaborated with this:

The system isn’t fair. We [corporate lobbyists] do have resource advantages. But the idea that we usually get our way, or can control outcomes, is wrong. Members [of Congress] are influenced by so many other considerations

The reactions of **Reviewer G**, an academic with expertise in environmental and energy policy, summed up nicely the way people’s unstated assumptions interfere with both their beliefs about what is true and our ability to talk about it. Reviewer G perceives less disagreement within the climate coalition about nuclear power than I describe in Chapter 4:

In your example of nuclear energy, you should probably recognize explicitly that environmentalist views on nuclear have changed radically since the 1970s, with many individuals and groups now in support (or at least not in vehement opposition). ... Most of my students are far more worried about climate change than nuclear disaster

Reviewer G has also encountered misunderstanding over the meaning of the term “socialism”:

[Y]ou correctly state that people use socialism, fascism, etc. in different ways depending on their political persuasion, age, and news media. When I think of socialist, I think of Canada or Sweden. Several years ago, I learned from a B&B host ... that socialist means Venezuela to him.

These barriers to understanding require conversation across political boundaries that aims at understanding the other person, and resists allowing judgment to cut off dialogue.

3. EXPERTS MODEL CERTAINTY

Some online climate policy influencers regularly communicate in ways that leave little or no emotional room for critical examination of their preferred energy policy narratives. The examples recounted in the book represent a small subset of online climate policy discussion. Certainly, there is plenty of online discussion that is relatively sober and civil (but truncated). But for reasons explained by the social science research recounted in Chapter 4, the ridicule and expressions of contempt aimed at political adversaries resonate, and shape belief. They are a type of public speech that influences norms of discourse online,¹⁶ particularly when opinion leaders engage in it.

The book explains that many of these influencers are making errors of presumption, assuming away possibilities that support opposing views. Over time they provide their followers with arguments and language for reproducing those errors and avoiding critical engagement of their policy views. For readers who remain unconvinced by the literature review and examples in Chapter 4, browsing the social media feeds of the following energy policy influencers over a period of time will simulate what their followers experience: a mix of more or less substantive, but mostly one-sided information and argument, punctuated by periodic attributions of ignorance or immorality to policy adversaries.

From the Populist Right

Alex Epstein

Chapter 4 mentions Alex Epstein (~196K Twitter followers) bills himself as a “philosopher and energy expert” online. His social media (and broadcast media) presence is gently misleading. He invokes his own expertise to invite disbelief in the climate consensus by contending, inaccurately, that continued *emissions* of GHGs are necessary for human flourishing. For example, Epstein claims that the energy transition will be prohibitively expensive, but does so without engaging the analyses that attempt to estimate its cost (like those discussed in Chapter 5). Occasionally he will deploy ridicule and epithets to make his case: “[P]eople think, ‘Oh, well, no, no, it’s not that I hate humans. It’s that I’m worried that human impact is going to ruin the Earth for humans.’ But it’s such a stupid view that human impact is going to ruin the Earth for humans inevitably.”

¹⁶ As noted in the preface to *Climate of Contempt*, some social media influencers deny that their social media posts are, or ought to be, influential. (Of course, whether they *ought* to be influential is a separate question from whether they *are* influential.) In a 2018 Twitter/X thread explaining his decision to delete old Tweets of his, David Roberts expressed concern about “bad faith dirtbags” taking his hyperbolic tweets out of context in order to “destroy” his career. This book reproduces several of his tweets – not to harm his career but as particularly colorful examples of how influencers can affect the tone and content of online political discussion, and which affects belief formation by others. However, the book offers qualified praise for Roberts’ writing and podcasting on the energy transition. As noted in Chapter 7, it would benefit our politics if social media wasn’t as influential as it is. Comedian Ricky Gervais once said that “Twitter is like being able to read every toilet wall in the world.” Perhaps over time more news consumers will come to see the online world that way, or at least to become more discerning consumers of online information. Until then, American politics will continue to be shaped by the online environment for reasons explained by the research discussed in Chapter 4.

Patrick Moore

Formerly of Greenpeace (as noted in Chapter 4), Moore (~152K followers) opposes the energy transition with the zeal of a convert. He uses scare quotes around the word “*climate crisis*” and describes the climate consensus as a “*hoax*.” Rather than explain what he believes the climate coalition is getting wrong, he ridicules members of the climate coalition as out of touch elites: “*City folk think food comes from a supermarket. This is a fundamental flaw in AOC’s flakey fantasy. Fossil fuels are essential to maintaining food production.*” To Moore, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is a “*pompous little twit*,” offshore wind is “*Biden’s offshore wet dream plan*,” and traditional media outlets are “*fake news*.”

Ben Shapiro

As noted in Chapter 4, conservative pundit Ben Shapiro (~ 6 million followers) denies neither the science of climate change nor the need for more substantive policy debate. But he does not practice what he preaches, frequently defaulting to sarcasm and ridicule. He denies the importance of climate science’s implications by assuming that technological fixes will materialize: “*You know what’s a great cure for it being super-duper hot outside? [Air conditioning and] being a first world country.*” He refers to Joe Biden as a “*trash fire of a president*,” John Kerry as a “*leech*” who is “*wrong on every subject*,” and “*whoever wrote the Green New Deal*” as a “*full scale idiot*.”

Dinesh D’Souza

D’Souza addresses climate change only rarely online, but with 3.4 million followers his tweets generate massive ripple effects. His modus operandi follows one part of the Limbaugh/Fox News model described in Chapter 4: namely, to highlight hyperbolic claims by proponents of the energy transition, and to invite the inference that they typify “the left.” D’Souza poses (or retweets) questions about anthropogenic climate science the way the Fox News chyron poses questions, in order to raise doubt without asserting or defending any particular facts. And he rarely returns to the lengthy threads his climate policy tweets generate. For example, his Twitter reaction to the IRA was the statement that “*Biden goes after your wallet once more*,” a Tweet that generated a thread to which he never returned. Another one of his tweets invited his followers to vote on whether the 2020 election was “*rigged and stolen*” (93% said yes).

Marjorie Taylor Greene

Rep. Greene (>800k Twitter/X followers) is included here as an example of the populist right in Congress. Her posts aim to delegitimize liberal democratic institutions. But she also spreads climate misinformation. In a widely shared 2021 Twitter thread recommending political separation of red and blue states, Greene included this on energy: *Red states would not have to abide by climate cult lies. Red states would be completely free to build and use fossil fuel energy for their citizens.*

From the Populist Left

Genvieve Guenther

Genvieve Guenther (~71K followers) is a Renaissance scholar and founder of an NGO called “End Climate Silence.” Guenther advocates a more confrontational, moralizing approach to climate communication, one based on contempt for fossil fuel companies and their allies. Her social media feeds feature more of the kind of hyperbole (“enabling climate genocide”) that was quoted in Chapter 4. But she also makes her case for moral outrage strategies in more sophisticated ways. Guenther has written a book on climate communication called *The Language of Climate Politics* (Oxford Press, 2024). And her social media feeds sometimes reference other scholarly works that support the kinds of social movement strategies embraced by Saul Alinsky and described in Chapter 3.

Bruce Bartlett

Like Patrick Moore (see above), former Reagan White House communications officer Bruce Bartlett (~60K followers) also posts with the zeal of a convert. On climate issues he is a Doomer, one who sees disaster as unavoidable and Republicans as uniformly irredeemable opponents of constructive action: “[A]ll Republicans believe [that] climate change is just an elaborate hoax.” He called Joe Biden a “fool to negotiate with them” and “hopeless, even more naïve than Obama.”

Waleed Shahid

Waleed Shahid is the former communications director of Justice Democrats, and another representative of the young progressive left. His Twitter/X account (~127K followers) features a pinned Tweet paraphrasing the early 20th century Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci: “*The old America is dying. A new America is struggling to be born. Now is a time of monsters.*” Shaheed is not a name-caller on social media. Like many of the progressives on this list he sees “moderates” as without substantive policy beliefs, and as more “naïve” than progressives (not less) and less hopeful (not more) about the future. He focuses attention on moderate Democrats who oppose parts of the progressive agenda, and has blamed “the party” for failing to “*deliver[] on voting rights, climate, child care, prescription drug costs, or nearly any of the things they’ve been promising voters for more than a decade.*”

David Sirota

Sirota’s social media approach is briefly described in Chapter 4. After leaving the Sanders campaign staff, Sirota (~321K followers) co-wrote (with director Adam McKay) the screenplay for the allegorical climate film “Don’t Look Up.” Sirota espouses a message that is straightforwardly morality-based, anti-corporate, and anti-moderate wing of the Democrat Party. Like journalist Glenn Greenwald, Sirota’s social media messaging on climate is consistently contemptuous of other progressives who he defines as “corporate.” Referring to Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez’ appearance on the progressive podcast *Pod Save America*, Sirota said this:

I think it's really something that elected Left Leaders will eagerly be interviewed by corporate Democrat hosts who created the neoliberalism that destroyed the left, but rarely ever accept interview requests from actual left outlets that might ask real questions....

I don't consider myself on the "left" - because this is what the "left" is now, and whatever this is is just not what my politics are about.

Amy Westervelt

Westervelt (~64k followers) is discussed in Chapter 4. She has a deep understanding of energy and climate policy and writes sophisticated analyses of climate politics that dispute the political analysis offered in Part I of this book. On social media she expresses contempt for those within the fossil industry, in politically strategic ways. For example, Westervelt derides the term “net zero” as “*meaningless*” and has ascribed Democrats’ inability to enact the Build Back Better bill to their being “*too concerned with civility.*”

Kate Aronoff

Aronoff (~91K followers) also writes about climate and energy with sophistication, and she too seems to have chosen her rhetorical strategy deliberately. Aronoff has described fossil fuel executives as “*war profiteers*” and the IRA as a “*betrayal*” and a “*devil’s bargain*,” because it left the oil industry’s core business model intact. For Aronoff, “moderation” and “civility” are to be ridiculed:

“I’m also a fan of Soylent¹⁷ in moderation!”

“US policy has killed hundreds of thousands of people, destabilized countless regions and is rapidly pushing the planet toward the brink of apocalypse but please, have some civility.”

David Roberts

The book cites climate journalist David Roberts (~199K followers) in several places. More than any climate other writer of which I am aware, Roberts has combined deep explanatory reporting on the nuts and bolts of the energy transition with an active and combative presence on social media. Having concluded that conservatives cannot be persuaded to support climate policy,¹⁸ Roberts’ Twitter/X feed steers his followers away from articles and sources that dispute that conclusion.¹⁹ He describes those sorts of articles as “*execrable bothsiding*” or absurd

¹⁷ A reference to film “Soylent Green,” in which the Malthusian dilemma is solved by scheduled killing of adult humans. In the film, “soylent green” is the staple food product from the remains of those killed.

¹⁸ David Roberts, Conservatives probably can’t be persuaded on climate change. So now what? Vox (November 10, 2017).

¹⁹ As noted in the book Roberts has been clear about his political tactical view that more polarization is needed. Like the *Pod Save America* hosts, he therefore sometimes ridicules calls for civility in political debate. For example, Roberts called a tweet by political scientist Brendan Nyhan, urging Democrats not to “dehumanize[e] the other side,” a “cop out.” Similarly, Roberts reacted to climate researcher Glen Peters’ tweet cautioning against “demonizing a company, person, or a sector ...” as “liberal self-pleasuring.” Presumably, for voters who have committed as fully as Roberts

anachronisms: “*OMG. I can’t believe pieces like this are still getting written in 2021.*” Roberts tends to treat objections or reservations about the progressive climate agenda with contempt. For example, he characterized legislators’ reservations about the effects of Build Back Better bill on the national debt as “*utter horseshit.*” For Roberts, voters’ worries about inflation are similarly misplaced, the product of a “*massive, highly coordinated propaganda campaign across multiple media designed to freak them out*”

For readers who are not on social media, following these Twitter/X accounts for a week or two can provide a fuller sense of the tone and content of social media discussion of climate and energy transition issues, and how that environment affects the beliefs and thinking of voters in ways suggested by the research outlined in Part II of *Climate of Contempt*.

has to the model of American politics that *Climate of Contempt* challenges, the analysis in Chapters 4 through 6 will be difficult to engage on the merits.