

We Need to Make Sound Policy for Pittsburgh and Paris

Joel J. Kassiola
Department of Political Science
San Francisco State University

President Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the 2015 Paris Climate Change Accord dramatically illustrates a profound gap in the climate change debate. It reveals the need for a social response to the environmental displacement of jobs that has been heretofore unrecognized. If this action by the President acts as a catalyst for public dialogue about the necessity for societies to address unemployment that is caused by climate change mitigation policy, it may prove to be an important turning point in the long-running and unproductive climate debate. And this would be true regardless of where one stands on the question of the scientific status of the human causation of global warming.

The President's rationale for the decision to reject the Accord's requirements to reduce America's greenhouse emissions was the negative impact on the U.S. economy, in particular, American workers and companies in several large sectors of the manufacturing economy: paper, cement, coal, etc. The conflict between jobs and the environment could not be starker. In order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to the Accord's required levels, large portions of American industry must either diminish their level of production or shut down entirely, both actions eliminating millions of American jobs.

Now, it is no exaggeration to say that President Trump may owe his victory to the vote of the coal producing states of: West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, and

Pennsylvania. President Obama's emissions reduction plan closed many coal-fired power plants and decreased coal production. The loss of coal mining jobs and threats to the existence of coal companies provided the Trump campaign with a powerful election issue to exploit.

In the wake of the 2016 election and the Paris Accord withdrawal, environmentalists must learn not merely to criticize the President for being an anti-environmentalist and a climate change denier, but to transcend partisan politics and recognize that environmental employment displacement is the underlying political problem. This is the most resistant obstacle to effective climate change policy, regardless of an administration's environmental stance. The American political system, and political systems throughout the world, are ignoring the issue of "environmental unemployment," or unemployment as a result of environmental protection requirements and policies to address them.

The paradigm shift and social changes to a post-fossil fuel economy will be challenging. If we are to succeed, we must break out of the jobs versus environment dilemma we are currently in. To do so, we must go beyond normal market-based thinking and remediate harms suffered by people thrown out of work by our efforts to prevent environmental catastrophe. An unaided labor market will not work sufficiently or quickly enough to create replacement jobs for the workers and their families who are the victims of climate change policies. Protecting the environment should not sacrifice the quality of life for tens of millions of Americans caught in the climate change crosshairs through no fault of their own. How can environmentalists expect their support and the support of their elected representatives? What do we

tell this large portion of American society whose economic lives are directly impacted by climate change mitigation policy? If climate change is both a global and nationwide problem for the U.S., all of American society must bear the burden of reducing the dangerous gases.

So what is the solution to the ever-growing dilemma: make policies that favor the environment and eliminate millions of jobs (Obama option) or policies that maintain carbon-intensive production methods that endanger the environment and the quality of life on Earth (Trump option)? Along with the burgeoning Robot Revolution, the environment is forcing the U.S. to change our means of production and employment. The nature of employment in developed nations must change so no future president needs to feel obligated to protect the jobs and welfare of millions of workers in opposition to environmental protection. If all the coal miners (or similar workers threatened by environmental displacement) knew that their economic stability would be preserved while consumption and production of coal was sharply reduced for environmental reasons, their opposition to climate change would be reduced as well. No candidate could win their votes with promises of continuing environmentally dangerous activities in order to keep their jobs and income.

Mark Zuckerberg supported UBI, Universal Basic Income policy recently at Harvard's Commencement. He was not thinking of environmental unemployment but was advocating a safety net for more people to take risks in their careers. What I propose is a belated but essential contribution of UBI to environmentally sound economic policy. We need to remove the toxic jobs factor from decisions made for

environmental reasons. Our policies must recognize and reduce the environmentally harmful “sunset” industries, like coal production, while not forfeiting the individual workers’ welfare that society is morally and politically responsible for.

Protecting our planet requires dramatic social change, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, for example. But we should not stop there. We must acknowledge that along with reducing CO₂, we need to protect the segment of the American population whose jobs are endangered by climate change policy.

Just as the environment is polluted by industrial waste products, our political system is polluted by the failure to address environmental unemployment. We can no longer afford to have our heads in the sand about the sweeping unemployment consequences of a rigorous and effective environmental policy. The Climate Change Accord withdrawal can be the start, not the end, of a new American policy that is politically comprehensive and responsible: one that incorporates the needs of both the environment and hard-working American citizens. We need to make sound policy for both Pittsburgh and Paris, and not choose one to the neglect of the other. We need to address environmental unemployment as well as carbon-based emissions, and a climate change mitigation policy that contains a UBI plan will do that.