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## Narrative Review

## Environmental attitudes and political partisanship

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To explore the impact of political partisanship on environmental attitudes related to climate change in United States and its implications for public health.

**Study design:** An integrative literature review.

**Methods:** A literature review of English articles was performed from January 2013 to March 2013 using the following databases: CINAHL, PubMed, Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, ERIC, psychINFO, and Wiley Online Library. Empirical and review articles and Internet sources were included.

**Results:** Continued mass emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases will exacerbate the consequences of global warming and climate change. As one of the key global contributors of carbon emissions, the lack of climate change policy and regulatory practices at the federal level in the United States is of great concern. Political partisanship in the US is largely to blame for this inaction, as efforts for drastic remediation action is met with rejection from conservative groups who do not believe that global warming and climate change are a problem, despite scientific evidence to the contrary. To promote the health of the entire population, there needs to be a paradigm shift from consumption driven economic growth as advocated by the Republicans to a realization of true prosperity beyond growth in order to create a sustainable world.

**Conclusion:** This presents a critical challenge to public health professionals as political partisanship has the power to impact environmental attitudes and have serious implications for public health. Preserving the environment must take precedence over economic growth if we want a habitable planet low in carbon.

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## Introduction

Climate change and global warming will bring dire consequences for agriculture, forestry, fisheries, ecosystems, coastal zones, infrastructure, water supplies and human health. It has been (under)estimated by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that by

2030 the annual global cost of adapting to climate change will be approximately \$49–\$171 billion US dollars not including costs for ecosystem adaption which could add an additional \$65–\$300 billion per year. These adaption costs will increase as global temperatures continue to rise annually.<sup>1</sup> The United States stands among the top current contributors of greenhouse emissions along with China and Qatar and is the global leader in cumulative carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions which

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can remain in the atmosphere for centuries.<sup>2</sup> Data from the US Department of Energy suggest that US CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (per capita) are declining,<sup>3</sup> but based on readings of carbon emissions and population data from the US Census Bureau,<sup>4</sup> one can estimate that the US alone was responsible for adding approximately 5.4 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions into the atmosphere in 2012.

The impacts of climate change are already being witnessed globally. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the impact of global warming on public health is due to rising temperatures, deteriorating air quality, 'higher incidences of food- and water-borne pathogens and allergens' and extreme weather events (e.g., heavy precipitation, tropical storms, droughts and wildfires).<sup>5,6</sup> With the average global temperature projected to increase by 1.4 °C–5.8 °C (34.52 °F–42.44 °F) by 2100, extreme events will become increasingly frequent and severe.<sup>7,8</sup> The world has already witnessed the devastating consequences of this warming; in 2003 the heatwave that struck Europe caused approximately 22,000 to 45,000 heat-related deaths across the continent within the span of only two weeks.<sup>8</sup> According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) estimates, the global burden of disease due to climate change had already exceeded 150,000 deaths globally per year in the year 2000,<sup>8,9</sup> primarily attributable to climate change-related cardiovascular disease, diarrhoea, malaria, malnutrition and flooding-related deaths.<sup>8</sup>

Changes in precipitation and temperature patterns will continue to cause shifts in the distribution of vector-borne and zoonotic diseases,<sup>5,9</sup> which alone are likely to further exacerbate the global number of premature deaths, among the other consequences of global warming. Within the United States anticipated health effects of climate change include: (a) forest fires, heat stress, food and water shortages, and malnutrition due to heat waves and drought; (b) increased respiratory problems and cardiovascular disease due to declining air quality; (c) greater incidence of food- and water-borne disease and vector-borne disease due to flooding; (d) increases in motor vehicle accidents and injuries due to winter weather anomalies; (e) injuries and drowning and ecosystem and economic disruption due to extreme weather events and sea-level rise; (f) the occurrence of mass population movements and international conflict due to compromised infrastructures and resources; and (g) negative implications for mental health after surviving an extreme event, displacement, or loss.<sup>9</sup>

In 2006, McMichael et al.<sup>7</sup> wrote, 'In view of greenhouse gas longevity and the climate system's inertia, climate change would continue for at least several decades even if radical international pre-emptive action were taken very soon' (p. 859). Nearly eight years later, climate change mitigation efforts are still lagging. If we have not crossed it already, it appears we are very nearly reaching the point of no return on the climate change issue.

As we learn more about climate change and reach greater scientific consensus about anthropogenic contributions to global warming,<sup>9–11</sup> the number of people who believe that climate change is a threat ought to be increasing but sadly this is not the case in the US.<sup>12</sup> Part of the reason for this decline is that climate change, a fundamentally scientific issue, has

become highly politicized within the past decade with increasing divergence in attitudes toward environmental issues between partisan political groups, particularly towards the issues of global warming and climate change.<sup>13–17</sup> This polarization is most evident along political party lines, with liberal Democrats believing that climate change is a significant issue requiring immediate remediation and conservative Republicans insisting that there is little, if anything, to worry about.<sup>12,15</sup> Science agrees with the liberal view by providing strong evidence for the inescapable effects that global warming will have on the earth and its inhabitants.<sup>5,7–9</sup>

Moderating these effects may be possible with radical, cooperative global efforts to drastically reduce or eliminate CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gas emissions,<sup>11</sup> but without universal support for such measures results are hard to achieve. There is abundant literature on the nature of and theories behind growing partisanship, the reasons for opposition, barriers to environmental regulation and the effects of global warming on public health, but there does not appear to be an article that addresses all these concepts holistically. The central question guiding this research is what impact does partisanship in terms of attitude toward global warming and climate change have on public health? The purpose of this article is to acknowledge how inaction due to the politicization and polarization of attitudes about global warming and climate change places the health and safety of the human race in jeopardy and to point to the urgent need for national leaders to come together to create and implement drastic, comprehensive efforts to remediate this issue.

## The Obama administration

There is no denying that the first inauguration of President Obama brought a movement toward climate policy and environmental regulation that was non-existent during the previous presidency,<sup>18</sup> representing a shift toward *population health*. Population health is defined as 'an approach [that] focuses on interrelated conditions and factors that influence the health of populations over the life course, identifies systematic variations in their patterns of occurrence, and applies the resulting knowledge to develop and implement policies and actions to improve the health and well-being of those populations' (Reference 19, p. 1675). In his first term, President Obama took on car companies to reduce vehicle emissions by raising fuel efficiency standards and made promises of federal investment in clean technology. However, as his term progressed, the economic crisis, health care reform, and military operations in the Middle East took centre stage on the political agenda leaving climate legislation subject to lax deal-making with watered-down or abandoned clauses in order to achieve any sort of progress. Weighing in very little, the President's seemingly detached approach to Congressional debates has incited frustration among the supporters of robust climate action.<sup>20</sup> The continued lack of federal policy on climate change 'is contributing to emerging sub-national efforts' (Reference 10, p. 72), and this leniency on domestic regulation may negatively affect the degree of clout President Obama holds in negotiating climate policy at the international level.<sup>20</sup>

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