Article Review: White House Proposes Restoring Key Parts of Landmark Environmental Law, Reversing Trump

Throughout his presidential term, Trump made a series of choices regarding environmental policy which left some members of the public, not to mention foreign leaders who were depending on US support, displeased to say the least. As of this month, Biden’s White House has “proposed restoring parts of one of the nation’s bedrock environmental laws Wednesday, requiring agencies to conduct a climate analysis of major projects and give affected communities greater input into the process” (Joselow), while also addressing Trump’s dismissal of climate change, bringing the law’s focus back to this issue.

Agencies would be pressed to take into account affected communities concerns, not just superficially, but by considering alternatives which would legitimately satisfy those concerns, giving communities increased power over their environments. As the article points out, many environmental groups challenged the Trump administration on its move, and put a great deal of effort into blocking projects that they felt to be particularly harmful to the environment, which, even despite the policy changes, proved effective in certain high-profile cases, such as the Keystone XL pipeline, which Trump approved at the start of his presidency, and was blocked by Biden after being held up by an “extended federal review” instigated by activists (Joselow).

The law in question, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), was overhauled by the Trump administration in 2020, limiting the respective duration of environmental assessments (EAs) and environmental impact statements (EISs), preventing some projects from being assessed at all, and directing agencies to not consider cumulative environmental impacts, including those which may be linked to climate change. This latter point, unsurprisingly, was the most contentious.

Another aspect of Biden’s plan (which was revealed to be only the first phase of a larger project, the second of which is slated to be revealed later), is to help provide a roadmap for the larger infrastructure projects currently being debated in Congress by allowing agencies to coordinate and evaluate the best way forward without adding anymore environmental stresses on the nation. This points to the broader system in question: not just the Biden administration, but also the broader aims of the administration and the country’s developing infrastructure.

Here the output is clear: address environmental concerns, while providing the public more avenues for providing inputs which in turn affect further outputs, paving the way for a clean feedback path. And there may be a number of inputs, from public frustration with the current state of affairs, to environmental groups (we have already addressed their particularly effective role in pursuing their desired outcomes, though the Trump administration had little difficulty ignoring them, and one may imagine that, had other factors not pushed them out, they simply would have continued to do so while limited the power of such groups), to the very fact that there are clear societal effects of environmental disasters, which any government would arguably do well to avoid. It is also important to note the emphasis on climate change, and the announcement’s placement with the U.N. climate summit beginning on the 31st of this month, which provides yet another input affecting the administration’s behavior.

While these decisions do aim to satisfy the pressure effected by the various inputs mentioned, systems theory speaks of not just one-sided inputs, but of an array of often competing inputs, and so, as the article does mention, there are those who feel that the administration does not go far enough, and those who feel that it goes too far. That it will make it impossible to get anything done when everything has to face such a lengthy review process. But these comments may be premature, as none of these changes have been implemented yet, and so the only outcomes are those that existed before and during the Trump administration's changes.

These outcomes, such as they are, may go on to affect the future behavior of the administration, or they may decide that they are able to simply coast on the goodwill it has managed to earn thus far, however much that may be. Still, it is clear in which direction the Biden administration is going, anticipating or pursuing one output over the other, despite a lack of any clear change in the various inputs. The previous administration faced all the same voices, and yet behaved in the opposite manner, suggesting an aim beyond either’s mere “survival as an organism,” but rather the proliferation of its framework. And so, with that in mind, one may instead cite that very fact as the system in question, which somewhat complicates the picture. Still affected by inputs and outputs, but somewhat more abstract, without clear borders. This, alongside the potential for administrations to simply ignore inputs and assume that it has done enough for its continuation.

In any case, the article is clear, and the application of systems theory, however imperfect the field as a whole might be, to coming to an understanding of the behaviors exhibited within the article seems fairly self-evident. The Biden administration is responding to clear inputs, from activists, environmental groups, ordinary citizens, and foreign nations trying to move ahead with reforms to curb climate change, in order to provide the outcome which will best satiate them.

Works Cited

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