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A safe place for moderates in a polarized world

Searching For a Responsible Localism

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By Harvey M. Jacobs

The Biden administration swept into office with a flurry of executive orders. One seeks to reduce the amount of fossil fuels extracted from federal lands. That has elicited support from national environmental groups (though some say the order won't go far enough) and local tribes while it is being roundly criticized by local officials, who say it will hurt their economies. In this first in an occasional series from emeritus University of Wisconsin Professor Harvey Jacobs, he explores the thorny issue of who gets to decide how resources – whether privately or publicly owned – should be used.

Introduction

I have rarely been identified as a moderate. Sometimes as a libertarian,

sometimes as a social democrat, sometimes as a socialist, but almost never a moderate. But Dave Cieslewicz and I agree that it is essential for those across the political spectrum to hear each other, listen to each other, and try, as best as is possible, to understand why 'the other' thinks as they do about issues and policy.

In this occasional series I want to explore a set of issues that emerge from environmental management.

Today's political polarization is about a lot of things, but deep in its most modern roots are disagreements about the ownership and management of private and public lands and other natural resources. This series will explore some of these core issues.



Prof. Harvey Jacobs

An Historical Preface

For several decades (since Ronald Reagan's presidency) support for environmental issues has been increasingly polarized. Republicans are characterized as against environmental laws, policies, and programs, while Democrats are characterized as in favor of them. That this is the situation is actually quite strange. Many of the most prominent environmental policy activists of the 20th century were Republicans. In the early part of the century President Theodore Roosevelt is largely credited with jump starting the modern conservation movement. In the 1920s future President Herbert Hoover when he served as Secretary of Commerce under Presidents Harding and Coolidge helped promote zoning as a then-new land use management tool for cities. In 1960 President Dwight Eisenhower created the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. In the 1970s Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York created the Adirondack Park Agency, and President Richard Nixon shepherded the passage of the National Environmental Policy, the Endangered Species, and Safe Water Drinking Acts, established the Council of Environmental Quality, and

created the Environmental Protection Agency. All of these were Republican – though most often bi-partisan and moderate – initiatives most of which are understood today as significant by a broad swath of the American public. So how did we get to the polarized present?

Local v. Regional Control

One of the big issues that separate protagonists (again loosely characterized as Republicans and Democrats) is what level of community (government) should have control over land and natural resource management, when such control is deemed to be necessary.

Local control advocates (largely Republicans) argue that resources are strongly place based. They can vary in character over very short distances. Thus they are best understood by those closest to them. And those closest to them have strong incentives to treat resources sustainably, because owners directly benefit from resource sustainability. Alternatives to local control may be true in theory, but in practice

non-local forms of management are captured by special interests who act against local interests. Regional control is socially and environmentally irresponsible. And besides local control is deeply and fundamentally American – think the New England town meeting.

Critics of local control (advocates of some form of non-local [regional] control) (largely Democrats) agree that the arguments for local control can be true in theory. But they argue that these arguments are often violated in practice. In fact, the history of local control evidences a practice that is often parochial, elitist, discriminatory, unsustainable, often seeks to maximize the self-interest of the local owner and community against other owners and local communities. Local control is socially and ecologically irresponsible. And in an increasingly complex world, locals rarely have the expertise they need to make well informed local resource management decisions.

So who is correct in this argument? They both are! Both sides to this issue have elements of truth in their presentations. Locals do understand local resources better than non-locals, but locals often do not have the expertise to make well informed resource management

decisions. Local control can be parochial and self-interested, but non-local control can easily be captured by special interests.

Since the beginning of the 20th century those across the political spectrum have taken up the call of ‘local control’ or ‘regional (central) control’ when it has best served their interests. Local (or regional) control isn’t an issue solely for Republicans or Democrats, those on the left or the right, market or government advocates. Instead it serves as a proxy for a deeper set of issues about who gets to decide about natural resource use and whose interests are taken into account in these decisions.

If we could all just pause and take a deep breath, I believe there is every reason to think we could invent a form of governance that is both local and yet addresses some of the main concerns of its critics – something I have long called *responsible localism*.

Harvey M. Jacobs is a retired professor from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where for over 30 years he taught in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning and the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies. More information about him and his work is available at harveymjacobs.com.